

I KNOW YOUR



SECRET

Mark Stewart

Kendal Chronicles book three

I KNOW YOUR SECRET

Mark Stewart

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‘Whatever is hidden will be revealed’

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I Know Your Secret

ISBN: 978-0-9807773-6-9

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7 murders in seven days

PROLOG

THE DOOR to the small apartment on the third floor opened. Entering the room, the intruder quickly closed the door. Clutching a rectangular shaped black leather case in one hand he stood for nearly a minute listening. The only noise he heard came from the old ticking clock hanging off the wall.

The man walked the length of the hallway. His footprints scarcely registering a dent in the long shag pile carpet. He wasn't a tall man. His shadow portrayed this fact when it swept across the newly painted wall. He never made a noise while doing the job. He did only what he got paid to do. After leaving the area he never left any evidence to uncover. Travelling the world for another job didn't pose a problem. He received a phone call three weeks ago outlining this particular job.

Travel to Melbourne Australia; shoot the homicide detective known as Alan James Kendal. When the job's done, leave the country.

The intruder didn't pay any attention nor did his stride falter when he walked past the expensive painting which hung on the wall. He didn't get paid to steal. The man stepped up to the apartment window. Looking past the narrow water trails made from drizzle the night before. The sniper needed to find the exact place his victim will be standing when he pulled the trigger. A lapse of concentration on his behalf must be avoided at all costs.

The ducted heating unit rumbled to life to mask any noise he accidentally made. The leading edge of the stack of papers on the antique mahogany coloured coffee table vibrated in the warming breeze. The man looked to have nerves of steel as he pressed onwards to his goal. Victory seemed a foregone conclusion. He never failed any job he'd been given.

The man crouched at the window sill, viewing the outside world, his eyes lifeless as a shark's. He didn't care for the person he intended to shoot or in the fact, he might be a family man. The motto he lived by was easy to remember. Never ask questions. Do exactly what you were paid to do, nothing more; nothing less.

The sniper opened the black leather case, viewing the contents as if they were a long lost love he'd spent months searching for. He gently stroked the weapon lying in the dark blue velvet cloth. Taking the pieces from the box he expertly built the expensive rifle. He pulled three bullets from his top pocket, lifting the first one up to eye level. Twisting the bullet between his thumb and forefinger he made full use of the light shining through the window to detect any flaws in the bullet's structure. He grunted a whisper before placing the bullet back into his pocket. He scrutinized the second bullet the same way. It twisted more perfectly than the first so he loaded it into the rifle's chamber.

Using a glass cutter the man cut a neat round hole the size of a saucer in the double glazed window. He placed a white square handkerchief on the carpet and wrapped the round glass fragment. He stowed the fragile parcel in a compartment in the case. Lifting his rifle he pushed the barrel through the hole.

Looking through the telescopic sight the sniper focused on a child skipping next her mother, going about their daily errands totally unaware they were being watched. Pointing the gun to his left the sniper stared at the media congregating in a group drinking coffee out of paper mugs. They were waiting for the detective to step from the courthouse. The traffic still

seemed light seeing how the peak hour rush must be imminent. Eventually, a small delivery truck rumbled past, followed by a police car and a woman on a motorbike.

The sniper re-checked his watch before sitting back on his knees to wait.

The courthouse across the soon-to-be busy street erupted, spewing people when someone shouldered the main door. The media and the police were too busy watching the man wearing a long black duffel coat to notice the end of the rifle. The sniper zeroed his gaze onto the anchorwomen from the media jostling into position in front of a bouquet of microphones.

The sniper wore a poker face. Looking through the telescopic sight the man continued his wait. He spied his target standing in the entrance of the courthouse. The detective appeared to be staring at the throng of people waiting for him to step up to the microphones. When he did, it'll be the perfect time in which to pull the trigger.

Walking from the courthouse, Detective Alan Kendal, waved at the crowd. His long black duffel coat flapped lazily when he descended the twelve stairs to the plateau above the footpath.

The sniper made himself more comfortable by spreading his weight evenly on both knees. He watched the cop straighten his tie before stepping up to the microphones, wearing a widening grin.

The sniper re-focused the gun sight for a clearer view, zeroing in on his target down to the millimeter. He'd wait patiently for the precise moment when the cop looked completely vulnerable. When the time came he'd strike, never giving the act a second thought.

The sniper's index finger slid over the gun's trigger, constricting slightly. A nerve twitched under his eye; however his trigger finger remained unshakable.

The crowd fidgeted slightly waiting for the Detective to speak. The sniper noted the cop looked relaxed. The hit man applied more pressure to the trigger. Someone directly in front of Kendal asked a question.

The sniper inhaled. The oxygen seemed to relax him further. He focused on the exact spot where he intended the bullet to penetrate flesh. Kendal shifted his body towards the woman.

The time felt right.

Detective Kendal signaled the woman to repeat her question.

The sniper exhaled before squeezing off one round. He only ever needed one bullet; never two.

A flash erupted from the gun followed by a muffled pop.

The victim spun in tight circles. He went down, hitting the concrete hard. Women screamed. Men yelled. The crowd ran like ants in every direction totally confused in which way to go. How easy could it be to shoot another dozen or two?

The sniper didn't hesitate longer than he should. He retracted the rifle from the window. In seconds he'd packed his kit away in the black rectangular leather case. He walked across the carpet again, opening and shutting the front door. He marched into the lift. Reaching out he turned the maintenance key which enabled the lift doors to close. He didn't intend to go down to mingle amongst the mayhem. The man planned to go to the roof where an almost invisible steel cable had been strung from building to building.

Hearing the noise of keys being poked on a keyboard coming from the next room the sniper froze. Could he have been seen while at the window? His mind raced at trying to think up what to do. He certainly didn't want to view the world from a prison cell. The man bit his bottom lip in a show of nervousness. Placing the black case on the floor of the lift he silently pulled his knife from its sheath hidden under his arm. Before stepping from the lift he switched the lift maintenance key to the off position. Closing the gap to the noise he slid along the wall.

The writer's fingers swept the keyboard. The words flowed fast across the monitor. The noise of bone stabbing the keys grew louder. The sniper found the front door to the room open wide enough to see most of the interior of the room. How easily could he sneak inside the room walk up to the person sitting at the computer keyboard finish his life and be back inside the lift in ten to fifteen seconds. The author will never know his fate.

The writer's shoulders stooped closer to the keyboard. Her fingers hit each key before moving to the next at a blistering pace. Faster and faster the writer forced her fingers to move. Sweat formed on her brow from sheer concentration. She seemed totally oblivious to the shadow on the wall staring at her back. The sniper smirked at the realization any noise he made will go unheard.

Too many chapters of the author's first book were re-written. The cursor started the last page pushing the writer's name (Myriad Jones) to the next line as it raced towards the finish. Victory looked to be in the writer's grasp. Poking the keys her fingers were now a blur. The words formed quickly on the monitor. No hesitation. This will be her masterpiece. The woman finally conquered the dreaded writer's block. The author ploughed on. The winning ribbon was close. The smell of victory hovered above her head like a crown; the one she couldn't wait to wear.

The overhead incandescent light globe picked out the cold sharp blade of the knife when the sniper lifted it high in the air. The marriage between the warm globe and the blade could never be.

The sniper's breathing deepened. He looked to be in complete control. Wild shadows danced on the wall behind the writer who kept increasing the speed she poked the keys, totally unaware she'd reached the last few seconds of her life. She'll never live long enough to hear how well her masterpiece sold.

Her final few breaths were unguarded.

The knife came down, again and again, cutting flesh and snapping bone.

CHAPTER ONE

Seven days after the shooting.

DETECTIVE KENDAL could hear the force of the current flowing past his dive mask. Entertaining minimal thought to what the Captain of the police launch told him;

‘Don’t be too long; if a cargo ship enters the bay we’ll have to pull up the anchor and leave the channel,’

Kendal plummeted deeper into the watery world away from the noise. He knew when he touched the sandy bottom some thirty metres below the surface, silence will reign supreme.

Tethering himself to the white nylon rope, Kendal dived into the sinkhole at the entrance to Port Phillip Bay about twenty minutes from the Port of Melbourne.

Finally reaching the bottom, Kendal immediately began his search. The base of the sinkhole looked to have a consistency made up of mud, silt, and sand. The size of the hole looked to be no larger than a small room. The vertical sides appeared to be glass smooth. The massive underwater torch he held illuminated a shape at the edge of the light beam. Kendal unclipped his safety line to venture closer.

Kendal slowly swam parallel a full metre off the bottom. More shapes loomed out of the ink coloured water. The shapes were what he’d been searching for. The information he found on his desk at police headquarters was right on the money. How it got there nobody knew. He casually read the missing person report, filing the information in his mind.

Kendal slowed to a crawl. Sifting loose sand by a swift sweep of his gloved hand for any evidence buried in front of the first shape. The eyes of the female corpse seemed to watch his every move. Looking around the pit he counted four drowned souls, each one a young female. Kendal floated above the bottom of the sinkhole soaking his mind of the gruesome scene. He wondered how scared each of the girls might have been. The group of four wore the same black full-length wetsuit and a single air tank strapped to their backs. At a closer inspection, each looked to be in perfect working order. He tested his theory by allowing a small amount of air to escape each of the tanks. Kendal watched the air bubbles rise to the surface.

Searching the area around the feet of the girls he unearthed four face masks. Each one looked to be brand new. His question, why did the girls drown haunted him. Each girl’s air regulator happened to be out of their mouth. They weren’t shot by a spear gun and he couldn’t find knife marks. For some unknown reason, they must have panicked which caused them to drown.

A study of the missing person folder will clear up who they are. Sadness tried to overtake Kendal. He didn’t allow the emotion to drift too far into his consciousness. If he lost his nerve some thirty metres below the surface he’d end up like the girls.

Kendal unclipped a thin nylon line hanging from his belt, securing one end to the steel chain which the first body had been draped in. He swam over to the other girls, in turn, repeating the procedure. Glancing one last time at the dead girls, he slowly ascended.

Breaking surface Kendal witnessed a wall of fog sweeping the sea. Wide eyed he turned to look for the police boat. Under his feet a black shape larger than a car slowly circled. To get a clear view, Kendal ducked his head under the glass smooth water. He watched the shark slowly turn back towards him. Kendal pulled the hunting knife from its sheath strapped to his ankle and braced for the attack. For the last time, he broke the surface for a breath before opening his eyes to a woman’s grin.

“Alan, you were asleep in the hospital chair. Did you have another one of those dreams?”

Rubbing sleep from his eyes Kendal looked up at the picture perfect woman hovering over him. Even after being married to her for years he still thought she resembled a stunning woman.

“Marg, up to now it has been the most vivid dream I’ve ever had. Dead girls at the bottom of the sea, a shark in an attack mode and the heat I felt when the bullet went through my shoulder which leads me into thinking whoever shot me deliberately missed.”

“Maybe you need to see someone.”

“Who do you suggest, a shrink?”

“I’m not saying you’re crazy. A psychiatrist might be able to explain the reoccurring dreams.”

“I doubt it.”

Shaking her head, Marg folded her arms “How can you say the sniper meant to miss?”

“Think about it. A sniper rarely misses. By rights, I should’ve been dead.”

“I don’t want to hear those words. You being a detective is bad enough,” moaned Marg. Glaring at her husband through murderous eyes she unfolded her arms and placed her hands on her hips.

“Marg, don’t fret. The more I think about why I’d been only shot in the shoulder, the more I believe the shooter didn’t want to kill me.”

“Alan, if you’re right, why and by whom?”

“I have no answers to your questions.”

“I hope you’re right,” hinted Marg, looking a little perplexed. “In all the years you’ve been in the police force, not once have you ever been shot.”

“I reckon I am dead right,” reported Kendal.

“I hope he never tries again.”

“I’m sure he won’t.”

Marg’s shoulders slumped slightly. She lovingly punched her husband’s good arm.

Kendal loved the way she played little games. He lived for them. It helped to keep his mind separate from the constant crime and the gruesome scenes. He especially loved the spinning game, Tegan and Tani, his thirteen and eight-year-old daughters loved to play. They were the competitive ones. Tegan and her sister were always practicing. Most times Tegan won. Spin three times and explain how to get out of a locked room using only what they can see. It was a humorous game he invented when they were little. They played the game so much when they grew older the game seemed to be part of the family.

Marg kissed her husband on the cheek. Kendal moved over to the edge of the recliner rocker which allowed her enough room to sit.

“Alan, do you remember any details of the shooting? The surgeon said things might be a little sketchy if not be blotted out.”

Kendal sat straight-backed, looking into his wife’s eyes. “I remember everything. Stop worrying, I’m fine.”

“You don’t look it.”

“I’ll be fine. Where are the kids? I thought they’d be staring at me while I slept.”

“You were talking in your sleep so I ushered them out of the room. They’re loitering around outside. They weren’t sure if you’d want to see them.”

“Of course, I do.”

“Before I call them in, I’ve an envelope for you.”

Kendal focused on his beautiful grinning Italian wife. The way she looked at times made his knees weak and his heart skipped a beat.

“Al, it’s a black envelope.”

“Let’s see it.”

“Really, Alan, I thought by now you’d want to see the back of the man. I think it is weird sending black envelopes through the mail.”

“GP isn’t trouble. He’s not the one who shot me.”

“How do you know? You said he’s a thug. I think you shouldn’t see him again.”

“I classify GP to be a friend. Think about it. If he wanted to see me in the ground he’d have shot me when we first met on the wharf. Instead, he offered to help clean the Melbourne streets of crime. I have to add he was a great help in the last case.”

“What did you call it?” asked Marg.

“Heart of a spider.”

“I still think you shouldn’t see him again.”

“He went out of his way to protect you and the kids from the gun fight in the supermarket.”

“I’m grateful for his help. Above everything I have a gut feeling you shouldn’t trust him. What sort of man hides his face when you look at him?”

“GP doesn’t trust a soul.”

“I rest my case.”

“Don’t worry. He’s okay.”

“Sometimes Alan James Kendal you upset me so much.” Marg pushed her nose into the air before marching out of the room.

Kendal turned his attention to the black envelope. He opened the flap and read the note inside.

“Hi friend, I’m sorry to hear you were shot. Hope you feel good. We’ll meet soon. Regards GP.”

No sooner did Kendal finish reading the get-well card when a torrent of arms and legs belonging to a couple of kids sprinted into the room. Marg brought up the rear.

“Tegan, Tani it’s good to see you,” blurted Kendal.

“We’re happy you were only shot in the shoulder,” advised Tani.

“Your statement means a lot to me,” replied Kendal, glancing at his wife.

Marg stooped, whispering in his ear. “Sorry for being angry. I cried when I heard the news reporting a well-known cop has been shot. Since then my nerves have been on edge.”

Kendal craned his neck to kiss her earlobe. “All’s well. As a matter of fact, I’m coming home. I told the hospital nurses the food is lousy. I pleaded they get the discharge papers ready.”

“You told them?” questioned Marg, looking slightly scornful.

“I ordered them to discharge me.”

“When?” asked Tegan.

“The moment you let me get dressed.”

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN KENDAL stepped through the doorway of his two storey house his mother-in-law's shark eyes was the first thing he saw. Her stare sent a shiver down his spine.

"The man of the house has arrived," she jeered.

"What have I done?"

"It must be amnesia from being shot. Let me refresh your memory you rose garden murderer."

"At least you're alive to tell me off. If it weren't for me, Patrick and his fire games might have made sure I'd be watching your coffin being lowered into the ground. Insurance will replace your house. If you speak nicely to them I'm sure they'll replace your roses too."

The old woman shook her fist under Kendal's nose. Marching upstairs she slammed her bedroom door shut.

"In no time she'll be moving into her new house," hinted Marg. "Don't worry, Mum will forgive you, eventually."

"Are you sure?"

"I hope so."

"Good, sooner she leaves this house the better we'll get along."

Kendal walked across the floor and sat in a chair. He pushed his arm sling aside to massage his hurt shoulder.

The phone in the study shrilled off its hook. Kendal moved to stand. Marg ushered him back into the chair. On the fourth ring, Marg managed to answer the call. Kendal watched her nod a few times before walking towards him.

"Captain Hughes is on the phone." Marg placed the cordless phone in her husband's hand before sitting on the arm of the chair.

"Kendal, Captain Hughes here. How are you feeling? How's the arm?"

"You didn't ring me especially to ask how I'm travelling. What's up?"

"You're right. I thought you might be bored sitting in your chair watching the television waiting for the healing process to finish. I need you to come into Police Headquarters ASAP."

"Cap, I'm on my way."

"Before you hang up there's one more thing I'd like you to do seeing how you're one of my top detectives."

"I know, stop calling you Cap."

"I knew you were a good detective."

"It's only a nickname."

"I don't care for the reason. Spread the word I don't like it. Correction, I detest it. If you and Claire Ambroso weren't such great detectives, I'd complain about it to the commissioner."

“Right Cap,” answered Kendal. “The only thing I’m not sure of if it’s possible to erase the nickname. If you need to point the blame at someone over your plight look no further than your predecessor. It’s his fault the nickname has stuck.”

“I wish he didn’t come from the army. You and everyone else in this building make my life a living hell.”

Ending the call, Kendal chuckled. He got out of the chair, swiping up the keys to the unmarked police car parked in the drive.

“Marg, I need you to drive me into the station.”

Kendal walked to the front door. Marg followed, closing the door in her wake. Slipping behind the wheel she brought the car’s engine to life.

“Why did Captain Hughes ask you to go into Police Headquarters? He knows you just arrived home from the hospital.”

“I’ve no idea, he didn’t say.”

“Maybe he has a medal waiting to surprise you. God knows you deserve it,” shrieked Marg, sounding excited.

“I doubt it,” snarled Kendal faking a chuckle.

Ten minutes ticked off before Police Headquarters came into view. Marg steered the car into the underneath car park and stopped close to the lift. Kendal eased out of the passenger seat. He stood waiting for Marg to join him.

The moment they entered the lift Kendal pushed the top floor button.

When the lift doors opened on the tenth floor Kendal led the way along a corridor. Standing outside an office Kendal read the nameplate screwed to the door.

‘Hughes’ office’

“Enter,” bellowed a voice, hearing Kendal’s usual sharp knock.

The moment the door opened, Hughes stood. “Come in; make yourselves comfortable.”

Kendal and Marg sat opposite Hughes at a tidy desk close to the window.

“I’m happy you weren’t seriously hurt,” stated Captain Hughes. “I apologize in advance for what I’m about to say. It might come across quite blunt.”

“Sure Cap, what gives?”

The big man in the grey suit glanced at Marg before settling his stare directly at Kendal. He lifted a manila folder out of the draw, dropping it onto the desktop.

“The folder’s your next case. The father of a missing street kid is in the next office.”

“Kid’s name is Sam,” reported Kendal, opening the folder, glancing at the first page.

“Do you remember her?”

“Yes, I do. Our paths crossed in fire games. After Sam decided to go for a swim in a freezing cold pool I decided I’d be her lifeguard while we chatted. I must add I’ve been keeping my eye out for her. Sam decided to turn her back on the idea of following her brother home and went straight back to the streets of Melbourne.”

“I want you to talk to the girl’s father.”

“I’d prefer if we didn’t meet,” confessed Kendal.

Captain Hughes pushed back on his chair. Leaning forward over the table his eyebrows angled to a point.

“I don’t care what you want you’ll go talk to the bloke.”

“Why me?” questioned Kendal.

“You and Ambroso were the last to see the street kid alive. Before you say a word which might damage your reputation on being a good detective, let me advise you I’ve just finished cleaning up the pool mess. If you didn’t successfully hunt Patrick down the commissioner might still be ringing me every day. Take my advice; accept the case.”

“Backtracking to the pool incident, Sam refused to talk. She volunteered to go for a swim,” advised Kendal.

“I told the big brass those exact words,” sighed Hughes.

“They believed you?”

Captain Hughes snorted. “Like I said, the case is yours.”

“I’m not into finding lost souls. Handball the case to Philips, he’s the expert in tracking down lost street kids.”

“I don’t care if you have to play with dolls. Find the kid,” taunted Hughes. “The case will give you something to think about other than your mother-in-law. I know for a fact she’s been giving you grief over the loss of her favourite rose bushes.”

“I wonder who told you?” mumbled Kendal sarcastically, glancing sideways at his wife.

Marg looked away to study the painting of a ship in a storm hanging off the wall.

“There have been five reported disappearances of young girls over an eight week period. The girls were aged between thirteen and fifteen. I thought seeing how you were on light duties for the next week; you could be easily persuaded to take the case.” A mischievous glint erupted in Hughes’ eyes. “I’ve been ordered to put the best team on the job. Kendal, you and Ambroso are the best two-man team I got. I also told the girl’s father I’d do my best to find her alive. I have a sneaky feeling she might have been the last to disappear.”

“I don’t want the trail of the sniper who shot me to turn cold,” jeered Kendal. “Besides, Claire will say no.”

“I’m sure a person of your intelligence can do both cases. I also want you to convince Ambroso to change her mind.”

Kendal stood, ushering Marg towards the office door. He turned to face Captain Hughes. “Why me? I’ve already mentioned Philips is the expert at finding missing girls.”

“I know. Sam’s father thinks the reason why you were shot might have something to do with his daughter’s disappearance. He blames himself.”

“It’s not his fault.”

“Don’t tell me, tell it to the father. Don’t forget to track down Ambroso.”

“She’s retired.”

“I don’t give a flying crap about her handing in her notice. Get Ambroso out of retirement. I still have her retirement form on my desk. I never processed it. Here, catch her badge. Don’t come back alone.”

Kendal escorted Marg out of the office, closing the door in his wake. Taking Marg by the hand, he ushered her towards the tea-room.

“I apologize to you for being in the meeting. I did try to have a week off.”

“Al it’s okay. Sam is more important. After you’ve found her we’ll have the week.”

“You’re an extremely understanding woman. I won’t be long,” he advised confidently. “Then we can talk to Claire.”

“What’s this, we have to? You have to talk to her not me.”

Kendal raised his hand. “Okay. I’ll need you to drive me to her house. Once we’ve found her I’ll do the talking.”

Marg grinned like a schoolgirl who successfully cheated on her exam.

Kendal gave his wife a quick kiss before walking off in the direction of interview room one. He certainly didn’t know how Sam’s father might react when they met for the first time. Marching past the main desk Kendal slipped out of his cloth sling, throwing it at the Constable behind the counter.

“File the material under lost and found.” He grinned at the rookie cop’s startled expression before opening the interview room door.

A tall roug- edged man wearing faded blue jeans and a white singlet stood at the window looking at the outside world.

Kendal’s memory soaked up the man’s description. Except for the world on his shoulders, he came across to be an average truckie.

“I’m Detective Kendal,” he claimed. Extending his hand, he walked across the floor.

“I’m Jeff Arnold,” replied the man, turning from the window.

Both men shook hands in a business-like manner. Kendal palmed the man a chair at the table in the center of the room.

“I’m a man who doesn’t mix words,” blurted Arnold, starting the conversation. “I know the reason why you were shot.”

“Do you know the shooter?”

“No.”

Kendal sat back in his chair eyeballing the man. “Where were you when the shooting took place?”

“In Perth.”

“Can you prove your statement?”

“I have delivery and fuel dockets to verify what I’ve just said.”

“Did you mastermind the shooting?”

“No.”

“Did you pay the sniper?”

“No.”

“Look, Arnold, I’m a busy man, state your business. The clock is ticking. I don’t want to waste my time entertaining you.”

“Mr. Kendal, believe me, I’m not here to waste your time.”

“Detective Kendal will do nicely.”

“Detective, I can tell you’ve decided you don’t like me. I can live with it.”

“Can you?”

“Yes. I don’t really care what you think of me.”

“I’ve been told why you’re here. I want you to tell me,” insisted Kendal.

“I’ve no one else to turn to.”

“Answer my question.”

“Please, I’m begging you to help me.”

“You don’t strike me to be the begging type,” hinted Kendal.

“You’re right. I’ve never asked anyone for help in my life.”

Kendal started to tap his fingers on the tabletop. Looking directly into the eyes of the man sitting opposite him he said abruptly. “This conversation is going around in circles. Let’s move on. May I call you Jeff?”

“My friends call me Listening man, or LM for short.”

“Meaning?” asked Kendal. An interested expression creased his forehead.

“I’m an interstate truckie. I talk to and listen to other truckies over the CB radio. I try to help them find a solution to their problems.”

“Sounds like you might be busy.”

“There’s a lot of truckie’s who have problems out there.”

“Have you spread the word your daughter is missing? Such as school friends, relatives, anyone she may see regularly?” asked Kendal.

“Yes.”

“Is there any feedback on her whereabouts?”

“None.”

“Have you rung the school Sam has been enrolled in to explain what’s happened?”

“Yes, I have. I’ve called them every day.”

“What’s their response?”

“They’ve taken no responsibility. They advised me there’s not much they can do except report her truancy to the police.”

“Have you been on facebook to ask if anyone has seen her? Kids love it. They place information on the website all the time. They seem to live on it.”

LM’s face started to redden. “I don’t know how to use the website. Besides, I don’t use computers. I hate them.”

“What about your wife, does she know Sam’s password?”

“I think she’s tried.”

“For someone who is desperate to find his daughter you don’t seem to be trying too hard. If my daughter went missing I’d find her password or someone who knows her and get them to open up the internet page. I’d shake the core of the earth to find even the smallest clue to where she might be.”

LM stood, hovering over Kendal.

“Sit down.”

LM seemed to hesitate before sitting back on the seat. “Sir, I assure you I’m searching every road to find Sam.”

“Have you spoken to Brandt, your son, he might know of Sam’s password or her where-a-bouts?”

“He’s not talking to me.”

Kendal rubbed his chin, mumbling a few incoherent words before speaking in a stern voice.

“Sam decided to hang around the Night Creepers. Have you spoken to them?”

“No. Who are they?”

“They’re the gang of street kids Sam decided she wanted to belong to. She confessed their name to me the last time we met.”

“This is why I need your help. Up to three seconds ago, I’ve never heard the name. Detective Kendal, I’m desperate for your help. I’ve no one else to help me. I help others by listening to their problems. Now it is I who needs the help. It’s why I conjured up the idea of saying I know the person who shot you. I needed something to convince Captain Hughes you were the only one who can help me find Sam.”

Kendal shook his head in disbelief. Digging his mobile phone from his pocket, he dialed his daughter’s number. On the third ring, a young girl’s voice answered.

“Dad, what’s up? I’m in class.”

“Tegan, if you get caught by the teacher tell her to talk to me. I need you to ask around the school if anyone knows of Sam Arnold’s where-a-bouts. If you can discover the password she uses to gain access to her facebook account or any info which can help uncover her hiding place her father will be extremely happy.”

“Okay,” whispered Tegan.

Kendal slipped his mobile phone back into his pocket. Leaning forward in his chair, he stared at LM.

“Has there been a ransom note?”

“Not yet.”

“Finally, I’ve heard some good news.”

“How do you figure?”

“It means there’s a good chance Sam is hiding amongst the Night Creepers.”

“She did ring home and told me you pushed her into a pool.”

“She volunteered to go for a swim. She wanted me to join in. I explained I felt content to be her lifeguard.”

LM narrowed his eyes. “Like you said before, let’s move on. I’m not here to point my finger at any wrong doing. The only thing my wife and I want is for Sam to be found, alive.”

“Where’s your wife now?”

“She’s at home looking after my son.”

“Where is home?”

“Riddles Creek.”

“You reported Sam rang home?”

“Yes, she said the next train was due to depart Southern Cross Station in five minutes. She told us the train will arrive at Riddles Creek at 12:57pm. We were there waiting for her.”

“The train Sam was supposed to be on, did it arrive on time?”

“No, it arrived three minutes late. The train pulled into the station exactly one hour after midday.”

“I take it Sam wasn’t on the train?”

LM shook his head.

“I wonder why the train was three minutes late.”

An uncomfortable silence descended on the room. Kendal waited for the man opposite him to look up.

“For what it’s worth I’m sorry Sam is missing. I’ll do what I can to find her. Deep down I always believed her to be a good kid.”

“Thank you. Please, I mean no offence when I must correct you on one minor point. Sam is still a good kid.”

LM stood, extending his hand before strolling towards the door.

Kendal watched the man leave. He rubbed his chin, pondering his sincerity.

CHAPTER THREE

KENDAL STOOD on the top stair leading down to the beach securely holding his wife’s left hand. The cooling temperature forced most people from the beach over an hour earlier.

“Nice day for a walk,” he mentioned, casually waving his hand.

“Cut the small talk,” growled Marg. “The walk isn’t why we’re here.”

Lifting her free hand to shade her eyes from the slight glare of the sun off the water, Marg scoured the beach in both directions.

“Let’s go home, this isn’t fair.”

“You heard what Captain Hughes ordered. You have to do it.”

“I’d rather have another round of Fire Games. Somewhere out there in a Melbourne suburb, there has to be another person more insane than Patrick.” Kendal’s deep voice sounded cold, almost uncaring.

“If there is I hope he stays away from our kids,” jeered Marg. “Patrick came too close for my liking.”

Kendal gently squeezed Marg’s hand. If nothing else he hoped the act might reassure her everything will be alright. Soon he’d apprehend the sniper and reunite Sam with her parents. Looking away to hide his grin, Kendal knew Hughes actually gave him a babysitting case. He decided he’d played on the bullet wound for too long. How he longed for a real mystery. All things considered, he actually enjoyed hunting Patrick.

Marg spied a figure jogging along the beach. She poked her husband in the ribs, pointing. Kendal watched intrigued at how the woman never flinched or lost her speed when the whitewash tried to sweep her out to sea. She wore tight black shorts and a pink singlet.

“The woman belongs on a catwalk,” mumbled Kendal.

Marg squeezed his hand when the jogger slowed a short distance from the steps. “She looks fit.”

“Fit enough to jog five K’s for breakfast and the same before dinner.”

The athletic shaped woman stopped, brushed her wet black hair from her face, staring at the two watching her. “Fella, you look like a cop,” she yelled.

“What’s it to you?” Kendal immediately received a second nudge in the ribs from his wife.

“Sounds to me you’re looking for a fight?”

“Maybe I am.”

“Alan, you’re not scared to ask?” quizzed Marg.

“I’m a detective, why should I be scared of a woman jogger?”

Shaking her head, Marg stared at her husband.

“Okay, I’ll ask. If the woman starts to yell again I want it on the record I warned you of her pendulum mood swings.”

The jogger ran up the stairs, glaring at Kendal. “What do you want, Sugar?”

“How’s the leg after being shot?”

“I know you’re not here to ask me stupid questions. How’s the arm?”

“I’ll live. Before you ask, I’ve felt worse.”

“I’m happy for you. Is your presence here social or business?”

Kendal looked out across the sea and studied a small boat anchored out in the channel of Port Phillip Bay. A figure looked to be throwing something black and heavy into the water.

“I think you’re stalling,” taunted the jogger.

“No, I’m not.”

“Cough up the reason why you’ve come here.”

“We need your help,” whispered Kendal.

“Who needs my help?”

“Come on Claire, don’t make me beg.”

“Miss Ambroso to you.”

Kendal moved his gaze back onto the small boat. Off to his right, he spied a cargo ship plowing through the water towards them. The ship appeared to be low in the water. He estimated the ship’s time of arrival at the small boat might be around the ten to fifteen-minute mark. The question, why didn’t the man in the boat prepare to leave the channel, flashed into Kendal’s thoughts. He instinctively slipped his hand into his pocket. He felt more than ready to talk to the coastguard over the incident when foam came from the rear of the small craft as it motored off to the other side of the bay. Kendal automatically lined up two points of sight just in case he wanted to check out the place where they intersected at a later date.

“The Police force needs you,” he mumbled.

“You’ve forgotten. I’m retired.”

“I told Hughes the same thing.”

“What did he say?”

Kendal focused on the sweaty woman standing at arm’s length. She looked comfortable leaning against the wooden railing.

“I don’t think you need to hear his words.”

“I repeat my earlier question,” quipped Claire, placing her hands on her hips.

“What’s the question again? I’ve forgotten.”

“You forget something. It’s highly unlikely. You have a memory larger than an elephant.”

“I surrender,” yelled Kendal “You and Marg win. I need your help.”

Claire broke out into a broad grin. “Kiss me and I’ll think about it.” Puckering her lips, she closed her eyes.

Marg grinned at her husband. He leaned forward. Claire grabbed his neck, swinging him in close. The moment their lips were almost touching Kendal twisted his head to one side. Her breath swept his cheek.

“Claire, I’m married.”

She let go of a school girl giggle. "I know. I went to your wedding." Claire poked him in the stomach before hugging Marg. "Partner, was it so hard?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"Enough shenanigans," growled Kendal.

"Tell me, are you having weird dreams again? The way you were studying the bay for a moment I thought you either tripped out of reality or it's those dream sequences you get when there's a new case looming."

"Something along those lines," grumbled Kendal.

"Claire, you're right. Al wakes in the dead of night, walks about the room mumbling about his latest dream before sitting on the edge of the bed to write it all down. In the morning he reads what he wrote."

"Sugar, don't get me wrong on this, a shrink might help," teased Claire.

Kendal glared at his partner. "Forget the shrink idea; we've got work to do."

"I'm going shopping," announced Marg. She kissed her best friend and her husband before walking off towards the car. "I'll see you two for tea. Don't be late," she called.

CHAPTER FOUR

KENDAL INSTRUCTED Claire to drive to the exact place he'd been shot. She parked outside the courthouse. For a few moments, Kendal sat in silence.

Opening the car door Claire stared at her partner. "Are you coming or do you want to sit in the car all day?"

The two detectives stepped from the car. They watched men and women wearing business attire walk past totally uninterested in the two plain clothed cops.

Kendal started to sway from side to side. He clung to the frame of the car door, using it as a crutch.

"What's up, Sugar?" asked Claire. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Worse," he mumbled. His grip tightened when his swaying got worse. His face drained to the colour of white paper. Kendal leaned harder on the car, trying to stay upright.

"Surely a big bloke like you can walk to the top of the stairs?"

Kendal shook his head slowly.

Claire gave him a lazy grin, walked around the car, slipping her arm around his waist.

"I should have brought my camera. This is indeed a momentous occasion."

Claire half dragged, half carried Kendal to the top of the courthouse stairs. His breathing altered sharply the closer he got to the exact place where he'd been shot. Seeing three drops of dried blood left for the rain to clean, Kendal's breathing quickened.

"You're serious aren't you?" questioned Claire.

Kendal didn't have the strength to even nod. The only thing he could focus on was the fact he needed to move his two-metre frame over to where he'd been shot. If he could manage to stand on the blood spots he knew he'd be able to put the ordeal behind him. If he couldn't he'd be an emotional mess till he did. He needed to accomplish the feat just so he could conquer his fear. He certainly didn't want to talk to a shrink. The longer he took to stand on the exact place where he'd been shot the longer it'll take to beat the fear rising on the inside of him into submission. If Hughes knew any of this he'd have no choice except to write him off as a cop.

Kendal took a step before his knees buckled under his weight. He looked up at his partner as he slipped to the ground.

"I think I'm having a panic attack." His voice sounded barely audible over the shouting from the street.

"Mister, are okay? Do you want me to call an ambulance?" asked a woman pushing a pram.

Claire gave the innocent bystander a look which signaled for her to leave the area or I'll arrest you on a loitering charge. Kendal came across the same look too many times.

The woman swore under her breath before marching away.

Kendal crawled on all fours. Reaching out his hand, he touched a blood stain. After vomiting near the dull red blotch, he slowly climbed to his feet using his knees for a ladder. Standing half bent Kendal looked into the eyes of his partner. He saw for the first time a sincere caring grin.

"If you can't get through this they'll retire you," whispered Claire. "I'd hate to lose a partner over a stupid reason."

"You're right."

"What did I just hear? We actually agree on something?"

Kendal managed to smile at her sarcasm. If nothing else it helped him to break the panic cycle tumbling through his mind. The pause allowed his brain to slip back in charge.

"Yes. If I don't get over this I'm finished as a detective."

Kendal forced his right foot to stand on the blood stain. Holding Claire at arm's length, he closed his eyes, breathing methodically. A full minute ticked off before he stepped off the blood stain, walked several large steps away before returning.

Claire watched Kendal's antics waiting for the panic inside his mind to disperse.

"Are you finished?" she finally asked.

"Yes, thanks for being here to help me. Be warned, if you breathe a word of this to anyone there's going to be trouble."

"What will you do, arrest me?"

"Very funny."

"I'll forget this happened if you kiss me."

"Forget it. We have a job to do. Let's go. We've wasted enough time."

Kendal straightened his clothes, brushing the dirt from his trousers. Walking off, Claire followed, shaking her head. Kendal glanced over his shoulder at the blood stains. For a heartbeat, he paused, deciding the fear of being shot will never again enter his thoughts.

The two detectives walked towards the building opposite the courthouse. Claire attempted to put her arm around Kendal's.

He pushed her gently away. "I'm fine, thanks for caring."

"Do you think I care?"

"Yes. I saw it in your eyes."

"The look came from the detective side of me."

Kendal ignored her taunt, knowing she lied. He quickly decided to keep the secret to himself. Massaging his shoulder where the bullet entered he looked about the area.

"I can still see what everyone was doing at the time of my shooting. Two blokes wearing suit and tie were cycling past. They heard nothing and didn't stop. A seven-year-old girl who'd been given an ice-cream started licking the end. The news media were bunching together, waiting for me at the bottom of the steps. They scattered like ten pins in a bowling alley when I went down." Kendal grinned. "It might teach the media something about loitering around outside a courthouse."

"I don't think anything could stop them," replied Claire.

"Come on partner, the rooftop across the street must have been where the sniper pulled the trigger."

"After searching the building we discovered the actual apartment he'd been in. The only evidence we've been able to uncover is there's a small hole in the glass window."

"No dirt in the room, no other evidence?"

"Nothing," reported Claire.

"Nothing," echoed Kendal. "How interesting."

They made their way across the street, entered the building through the revolving door and sprinted for the lift. They stepped out onto the roof of the eleven storey building. The sun looked to be at its highest. Kendal and Claire simultaneously placed sunglasses over their eyes while marching to the edge. Looking at the ground, Claire pushed her arm out.

"I'm not about to jump," blurted Kendal.

"I know." She pulled her hand away, flashing him a cursory grin. "Why are we on the roof?"

"The sniper must've been an expert at his craft. By my reckoning, he should have made his way up here to escape."

"What makes you so sure he didn't vanish in the mingling crowd?"

"Did you happen to see a man walk away carrying a case?"

"Not that I can recall."

"Going by your statement I reckon he'd probably head up here to the roof so he can easily escape."

Kendal looked down on the courthouse steps. He knew it would amount to nothing. However, he needed his mind to soak in what the sniper may have seen after he viewed his deed.

"Look around the area to see if there's any new evidence."

"The boys in blue have scoured this rooftop. They found nothing," reported Claire.

Kendal gazed along the low wall to his left then to his right. A small shiny metallic object glistening in the sunlight caught his attention. Keeping his stare on the object, Kendal

walked over. He picked up a single bullet half hidden in an indent in the concrete rooftop. He lifted it to eye level.

“If there’d been a thorough search, how do you explain this?”

“I’m positive the cops didn’t miss an easy find.”

“Can you remember if it was cloudy when they conducted the search?”

“I think so.”

“It could explain it. I might have missed it too if it wasn’t for the sun. Or someone planted it after the search.”

“Why plant a bullet casing after the shooting?”

“To be found,” blurted Kendal.

“Or we’re chasing a crooked cop?” added Claire.

“Anything is possible at this early stage. Let’s walk to the other side of the building.”

Claire reached the opposite side of the building before her partner.

“Careful, Sugar, I don’t want you to accidentally fall. You’d make a large mess falling from this height.”

“I’m not amused,” growled Kendal. Looking down at the pavement he saw a single strand of wire had been strung from one building to next. He stared at Claire through excited eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“How come nobody saw the cable?”

“What cable?” Claire asked, looking stunned at the news.

“The one attached to this building and the next. The sun is in the perfect position to capture the shape of the almost transparent cable,” reported Kendal.

“Unbelievable. Will you look at that? Use your breath to blow me over.”

Kendal used his finger to trace exactly where the cable ended.

“The other end is attached to the building across the street. First floor; the window facing east. Let’s take a walk.”

“Hold it a moment, Sugar. Why, if the sniper took extra care in making sure he left no evidence, did he leave a cable stretching from one building to the next, let alone a bullet?”

“Both good questions,” grunted Kendal. “When we catch up with him I’ll be sure to ask.” He retrieved the bullet from his pocket so he could study it again. He snatched his Smith and Wesson out of his shoulder holster, extracted a bullet from one of the chambers to compare the two bullets. “They look exactly the same,” he announced. Frowning, Kendal handed both bullets to Claire before adding. “I’ve a hunch. I’m interested in hearing if you agree. Feel the weight of the two bullets. The one in your left hand is the bullet from my gun. The one in your right hand is the bullet I found on the roof, allegedly left by the sniper.”

“The one from the roof feels slightly lighter.” Claire stared at her partner before handing the bullets back. “Meaning?” she asked.

“I have a feeling the bullet from the roof mightn’t have gunpowder in it. When we get home tonight I’ll open the bullet to find out.”

“What about this idea. The cable is connected to the first-floor window. Maybe the number one is a clue?” added Claire.

“I doubt it. I’d been shot from a window on the third floor of this eleven storey building. The number one isn’t even a prime number.”

Both detectives marched across the street to the other building. The moment they entered they walked towards the main counter. A young man wearing a plain black suit and tie was talking on the phone taking a reservation. He looked up when they approached.

“You look like the cop who was shot outside the courthouse?” he questioned, placing the phone back on its cradle.

“Correct,” answered Kendal. “You don’t appear to be happy.”

“I’m not. Thanks to you I lost twenty dollars.”

“How so?” jeered Claire.

“A mate and I made a bet you’d be dead by now.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” snarled Kendal. “I’ll try harder next time.” His face took on the look of a lion ready to bite. “I’d like to find out if there is anyone staying on the first floor, room number one, east side.”

“I can’t say. Company policy. No information can be given to the general public. Discretion is the highest priority.”

Beckoning the young man to step closer, Kendal leaned forward over the counter.

“I don’t give a flying crap about company policy. My easy question only needs a simple answer. If I don’t hear it I’m going to take the lift to the first floor, march up to and kick the door open to room number one on the east side. I might even put a few bullet holes in the wall for fun. Nod if you understand?”

The lad’s Adam’s apple bobbed violently. Glancing at Claire before looking down on the desktop at the black leather bound ledger, he flipped two pages back.

“The room has been vacant for fifteen days. I can let you in.”

“Good. I need to know the name of the last person to have stayed in the room?” asked Kendal.

“They were Mr. and Mrs. Beachcomb. They were newlyweds. They signed the entry book at 3:47am.”

Kendal and Claire followed the man to the lift. In silence, they rode the car to the first floor. They were escorted along the corridor to room one on the east side.

Kendal pulled out his police issue Smith and Wesson, waiting for the electronic card to be swiped in the lock. When he heard a click Kendal swept the man to the side. Reaching out Claire pushed on the door. Holding his gun at the ready, Kendal carefully swept the area. Claire scrambled into the room to begin her search.

“All clear,” whispered Claire.

Kendal made a quick search of the bathroom.

“All clear,” called Claire, from the only bedroom.

“All clear,” echoed Kendal. He walked towards the balcony door. Using the back of his hand he parted the curtain, slid the glass door open and stepped into the sunshine. Reaching out, he touched the cable. “This is definitely how the sniper exited the area undetected. He slid from the opposite building down to this balcony.”

Kendal studied the floor plan when he re-entered the hotel room. Discovering a bullet casing on the carpet at the foot of the bed, he walked over, picking it up.

“It appears to be the same size bullet from the rooftop,” reported Claire.

Kendal pulled the bullet he found on the rooftop from his pocket. He closed his eyes, zeroing his sense of touch on both bullets.

“They both feel empty. I’ll open both bullets when we get home.”

“If the sniper used this room to make good his escape, he left no trace. Not even a smudge on the carpet,” advised Claire.

Kendal stared at her.

“What’s up?”

“The room is clean except for the bullet.”

Kendal motioned for the lad to enter. He crept into the room like a scolded pup.

“You reported this room hasn’t been used in three weeks?” quizzed Kendal.

“Two weeks and a day, Sir.”

“I stand corrected. We’ll lock up when we leave.”

The lad stepped backwards out of the room. It took him two seconds to vanish.

“It’s not like you to make a factual mistake,” stated Claire, eyeballing her partner.

“I deliberately said three weeks and not fifteen days. I wanted to discover how honest the lad is. I believe he quoted exactly what’s been recorded in the ledger.”

“Meaning?” asked Claire.

“The room is too clean. It’s over clean.”

“Good housekeeping by the maid.”

Kendal snorted. “The room hasn’t been occupied in fifteen days. Why isn’t there any dust?”

“Again I ask what the meaning is.”

Kendal shrugged before walking towards the door.

CHAPTER FIVE

KENDAL ENTERED his two-storey home. A fuming woman greeted him. Claire saw his wife’s thunderous look so she quickly made herself scarce by marching upstairs to the bathroom.

“Is there a problem?” asked Kendal, innocently.

Marg marched over to where he stood. Glaring at him she burst into uncontrollable sobs. Kendal wrapped his arm about her waist, guiding her to a chair.

“Did something happen today?”

“Yes,” moaned Marg on a sigh. “At the supermarket today a man wearing a wide-brimmed hat grabbed my arm. He told me not to turn around or scream. He asked me to give you a message.”

“When he spoke did he sound friendly?”

Marg paused for a moment, reliving the event. The colour of her face changed from anger red to olive. She exhaled as her shoulders sagged.

Descending the stairs to listen in, Claire stood leaning against the balustrade.

“Yes, I suppose you could say he sounded friendly,” whispered Marg. “He spoke as if he’d known us for decades.” Looking directly into Kendal’s eyes she continued. “Where were you to protect me?”

“It’s okay. You can trust the man.”

“It’s not okay. I can still feel his hand on my arm.”

“Did he hurt you?”

Marg shook her head, trembling from head to feet.

Claire walked across the room to place her left hand on Marg’s shoulder.

“GP and I will discuss his actions,” advised Kendal.

“He said he knew some information regarding Sam, the missing girl. Al, please, I beg you, stay away from the man. I sense he’s big trouble.”

“I promise I’ll speak to GP.”

“You have to let him know he scared the hell out of me. It took me a lot of courage to even enter the shop. I’ve tried so hard to block out the incident of the gunfight a while back. Why did he grab my arm? I feel he’s stopped me from ever going to the supermarket again.”

“He did try to stop the shooting. He saved you and our two kids from being shot.”

“I suppose I should try to convince myself to regard him as a friend.”

“Good idea. Are you okay now?”

“I’ll be fine. I still think it’ll take time before I can enter the place again.”

“Go shopping elsewhere. In a few weeks, you’ll be able to go there”

Hesitantly Marg nodded. She even attempted to smile.

“I don’t mean to be insensitive,” blurted Claire. “What’s the message from GP?”

“He told me Sam, the missing girl, boarded a train to Riddles Creek. He added she never arrived. Be careful. I’ll be in touch.”

“Sam’s father said she phoned from the train station. He reported she never arrived. Which means the girl went missing somewhere between Melbourne and Riddles Creek. If all the pieces of information are correct. Something happened on the train.”

Kendal pulled his mobile phone from his pocket, tapping up a number. He waited for a man’s voice to answer.

“Hello.”

“Jeff Arnold, Detective Kendal, I need an up-to-date photo of Sam. Could you bring it to Police Headquarters first thing tomorrow morning? I have a solid lead on her whereabouts.”

“Fantastic news. Care to share your information?”

“The information I have obtained is that Sam actually boarded the train after she rang you. Exactly what time did she ring?”

“Thirty-three minutes before midday. Sam told me she’d be arriving at 11:57am.”

“Is there anything else you can add?”

“My daughter said sorry for upsetting me and her mother, adding she wanted to go back to school to have a bright future.”

“Were those words yours or Sam’s?”

“My daughter told me they were spoken by you. She also stated the idea made a lot of sense.”

“Those weren’t my exact words. However, they were close enough. I’ll need the photo of Sam first thing in the morning. In the mean time if you can add anything no matter how insignificant it might be, please, let me know in the morning.”

“I’ll be at Police Headquarters at nine o’clock.”

Kendal slipped his phone back into his pocket. Raising an eyebrow at Marg and Claire he beckoned them to join him in the study.

“Let’s see what’s inside these two bullet casings,” Kendal hinted, sitting at his desk.

“What bullets?” quizzed Marg. A nervousness expression erupted on her face.

“Claire and I visited the courthouse where I’d been shot. Seeing how the apartment where the sniper waited looked clean, I decided to widen my search. I found a bullet casing on the roof and a cable stretching to the next building. We searched the second apartment, uncovering a second bullet. Either the bullets were left deliberately or by accident. We three are about to find out.”

“How?” asked Marg.

“I’m going to unscrew the bullets.”

“Won’t the bullets explode?”

Shaking his head to reassure Marg, Kendal drove his hand into the top drawer, pulling out a small pair of pliers. In a quick twist, the cap fell off. He repeated the sequence on the second bullet.

Claire picked up the first casing. “This one doesn’t have any gunpowder in it.”

“Neither does the second,” reported Kendal. “Marg, are the tweezers handy? There’s a small piece of paper inside both bullet shells.”

She nodded, trotted out of the room only to re-appear in seconds. Marg handed over the tweezers. She watched her husband gently push the tweezers between the paper and the brass side. Carefully he extracted a small piece of paper from both casings. Both pieces of paper were no larger than a water bottle cap. Placing both underneath a magnifying glass Kendal slowly unraveled the tightly wound yellow paper.

“Will you hurry it along? I’m growing older by the second,” teased Claire.

“Slow and easy wins the race,” whispered Kendal.

“Any slower, mushrooms will burst forth from the carpet.”

“Partner, you’re a bucket of laughs. This is police evidence. I don’t want to ruin anything which might have been written on.”

“Why don’t you admit you’re out of your depth,” jeered Claire.

“My husband will never contemplate even thinking such a thought,” giggled Marg.

Kendal rolled his eyes at the two ladies before concentrating on the unveiling. At long last, the first paper lay flat on the desktop.

“I was paid to miss,” spoke Kendal, reading the notes out loud.

“What sort of sniper wants to line up a human target and be paid only when he deliberately misses?” questioned Claire. “Why risk your own future on such a stunt?”

Marg stared at Claire. “A sniper who could guarantee he’d be successful in not killing his target sounds absurd.”

“If I were asked to deliberately miss when I shot someone I’d expect to be paid top dollar,” snarled Kendal. “Surely the list of people who could accomplish such a feat can’t be too long.”

“Two identical notes left behind by the same sniper. He sure is cocky,” stated Claire.

CHAPTER SIX

THE NEXT morning at around eight thirty Claire followed Kendal to the unmarked police car parked in the drive. He opened the driver’s door and slid behind the wheel. A man wearing a balaclava over his head sprinted out from behind a medium sized bush, pointing a gun at them. Sliding onto the back seat, he lowered the gun out of sight.

“Keep your hands where I can see them. I don’t want either of you to turn around. If everything goes my way, in one minute, I will be out of your lives forever. Do what I say and nobody gets dead.”

“What is it you want?” asked Kendal, in a matter of fact tone of voice. He wanted to kick himself for thinking of Sam and not of his surrounds. Never again will he be caught off guard.

“I’ve a message for you, Detective Kendal. Tell GP we’re onto him. There will be no more communicating between him and you cops. If he keeps travelling down the same road he will be shot dead.”

Kendal raised his eyebrows, watching the man exit his car in the rear view mirror. The messenger slipped backwards into the bush before vanishing over the fence.

“Interesting message,” gushed Claire, preparing to jump down from the car in hot pursuit.

“Partner, don’t bother. The messenger will have abandoned the area by now. If he’s good as GP he’ll have an escape route meticulously planned. He probably has two or three extra escape routes up his sleeve in case of an ambush. His message seemed crystal clear. If it were a fake warning they convinced me. The next time I speak to GP I’ll let him in on the message. I’m confident he’ll put a stop to the problem.”

The moment they arrived at Police Headquarters they were greeted by a big man wearing blue shorts and matching singlet. His boots were well worn. A petite woman stood with her arm linked through his.

“Mr. Arnold I’m pleased you’re on time,” grunted Kendal. “Please step this way. Interview room four is off to your left.”

The group entered the small square room. Claire brought up the rear, closing the door behind her.

“Detective Kendal, this woman is my wife, Crystal.”

“Hello, Sir.”

Kendal noted she spoke in a quiet mouse-like voice. “Mrs. Arnold I’m pleased to meet you.”

“Please, call me Crystal.”

“The woman standing at the door is my partner, Detective Claire Ambroso. Mr. Arnold, please sit next to your wife.”

The man stuck his hand up to interrupt. “I’ve already stated the last time we met you can call me Listening Man. LM for short.”

“LM, the news of your daughter’s whereabouts is a mystery. However, I have high hopes she will be found soon. Have you discovered where she’s been of late?”

“I distinctively heard you say last night you have a solid lead.”

“Yes, you heard correctly.”

“Tell me what the information is?” questioned LM.

“It’s police business.”

The man appeared to be genuinely disappointed. He stood, leaning over the desk. “If you won’t tell me I have no choice left except to think you have nothing.”

Crystal leaned forward in her chair. “Detective, I know you’re doing your best.” She lifted an average sized photo of Sam, placing it on the table under Kendal’s nose.

He picked it up, studied it for a moment before handing it to Claire.

“I’ll have some copies run off,” she chirped.

“I can’t promise I’ll be able to find Sam today. I am hopeful I’ll have her in my sights before the trail goes cold.”

LM wore a disapproving look. He stood straight, dragging Crystal to her feet. “Keep me informed. I pray you have more to go on than Sam boarded a train.” He turned on his toes, walking his wife out of the room, nearly bowling Claire over in the process.

“I’ve summed the man up into one word. He is a rude individual. I feel sorry for his wife,” spat Claire.

“You said eleven words,” informed Kendal.

“I changed my mind about using a metaphor,” blurted Claire. “Where do you want to start?”

“It’s time to catch a train.”

Southern Cross railway station still looked to be a hive of activity even though the peak period had finished an hour ago. Kendal flashed his police badge at the ticket seller. He stepped onto the platform followed by Claire. The businessman standing directly in front of them checked his watch before observing a group of boys making a ruckus at the other end of the train platform.

“I hate to say it, I think we should look the other way,” advised Claire.

“I agree. If the information is accurate and Sam did actually board the train, the same person or persons might be watching for another victim.”

Kendal and Claire waited for the train to rumble to a stop. They boarded the train and sat at the back of the first carriage studying the few commuters who stepped into the carriage at the same time. One commuter settled himself onto the seat and closed his eyes. The second, a woman in her late twenties wearing casual attire looked content to read the newspaper. The third happened to be an elderly woman. She’d opened her paperback novel to the middle pages. Two young children, a girl, and boy sat next to her looking out of the window.

The train slipped away from the platform. It quickly picked up speed, creating a rocking motion.

Kendal stepped up to the first of the three people onboard. “Excuse me,” he said, thrusting the photo of Sam under the man’s nose. “Do you know this girl? Have you seen her lately? I’m trying to find her, she’s my daughter.”

Each person he asked shook their heads before looking the other way. Kendal returned to his seat stowing the photo in the pocket of his coat.

“I’m amazed at why people don’t sit next to each other on a train,” whispered Claire.

The train pulled into the next station. The two detectives discreetly stepped onto the cracked concrete platform, noting the bush setting. Trees replaced buildings. The countless houses backing onto the train line looked weather-beaten. Their fences were either leaning at a precarious angle or the vertical boards were broken. Kendal busied himself studying several commuters waiting to board the train before following Claire into the next carriage. He scurried to a seat as the doors closed.

The next carriage mirrored the first. The four youths loitering at the door were the only exception. They stared at Kendal the whole time the train was in motion. The moment the train stopped at the next station the boys ran to the next carriage.

“They should be in school working on their future,” commented Kendal, checking the time.

Claire stepped from the train grinning. “You need to get involved in the school system more often. It’s a lay day for the teachers.”

“I wondered why Tegan wanted to go to the movies today,” he replied.

The two detectives stepped into the third carriage. Kendal noted there were only three people sitting; two ladies and a child. A fifteen-year-old girl and her friend were standing near the door.

Kendal and Claire settled onto the seats at one end of the carriage. At the opposite end, the same four boys from the second carriage were starting to harass the girls. A look of terror in the eyes of both girls portrayed they were on the verge of crying.

Kendal leaned sideways, whispering in Claire’s ear. “Pretend you don’t know me. I’m about to interrupt the boys fun.”

Claire gave him a sharp nod.

Kendal sat in silence on the seat in the back corner, his gaze glued on the boys through the reflection of the glass window.

The moment the train slipped away from the next station platform Kendal stood, straightened his duffel coat before approaching the four youths.

“Have any of you seen or know the whereabouts of the girl in this photo?” he asked, thrusting the picture under each of their noses.

“Nope, not me,” chorused the four.

“Are you sure? Take a good hard look.”

“Hey dude, we already told you no, what’s your problem?”

“I’m the girl’s father. I want to find her.”

“Get out of our faces.”

One brave lad pushed Kendal’s right shoulder.

Squaring himself to the lad Kendal again asked his question.

“Are you sure you haven’t seen her?”

“No,” he insisted.

Kendal quickly sized up the lad. He appeared to be the biggest. His long brown hair touched his shoulders. The earring he wore depicted a skull and cross-bones. Using his peripheral vision he noticed the lad slowly curling eight fingers into two tight fists.

“How would you like to have a matching sore shoulder?”

“I don’t believe you have never seen Sam,” said Kendal.

Claire stood. Swaying slightly from the rocking motion of the train, she approached the group.

Kendal heard a flick knife blade snap open. He glared at the tallest of the group.

“Tell your friend to put the knife back in his pocket.”

The greyhound built lad standing on Kendal’s left showed off the glistening new blade by lifting it to eye level. The overhead fluorescent lights made the sharp blade sparkle.

“I’m thinking of burying this in you,” he spat through a locked jaw.

Kendal moved first, grabbing the boy’s wrist, twisting his hand behind his back. The rest of the group sprinted for the opposite end of the carriage. Kendal handcuffed the lad and slipped the knife deep into his pocket.

“Tell your mates to sit. I want to see three statues.”

“I think we better do like he said,” yelled the lad.

The three onlookers at the other end of the carriage sat staring.

“Join your mates,” Kendal growled, shoving him in the left shoulder blade.

The handcuffed teenager walked half bent to where his mates sat. “We don’t have no train ticket. Please, let us go.”

“I want one of you to tell me if you know the girl in the photo?” questioned Kendal, hovering over the group.

“None of us do. Good looka though. You really her father?”

Kendal produced his police badge, shoving it at the lad’s face. “I’m worse.”

“Excuse me, Sir,” whispered one of the two girls the boys harassed. “Thanks for helping. Those boys have been on this train for weeks harassing every girl they see.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve seen the girl in this photo?” asked Kendal, flashing the picture at the two teenagers.

Both girls shook their heads.

“Think hard, are you positive?”

“I’m sure,” chorused both girls.

Kendal watched the girls walk to the other end of the carriage where they sat wearing a grin. They looked ecstatic the boys were, at last, going to be stopped. Refocusing on the boys, Kendal’s face remained stone cold.

“Now I have some interesting info on you boys, I’d like a few questions answered.”

“Can we make a deal?” asked the smallest of the four.

“I’m not into deals. Talk to me. The girl in the photo is missing. I want you to tell me where she is?”

The four boys pushed their backs further into their seats.

“How often and how long have you travelled on this train?”

“Almost every day for the past four months. We mean girls no harm. All we’re after is a kiss.”

“Let me get your story in some sort of order,” interrupted Kendal. “Failing to purchase a ticket, you ride the train from Melbourne to Riddles Creek daily to harass girls?”

“Exactly. We ride the train for nicks, nothing, zip,” stated a short thin dark haired boy. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down when he swallowed. “Now I’ve studied the photo at length I saw her two days ago.”

“Did you see her on this train?”

“Yes.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere.”

The teenager tethered by the handcuffs stood.

“Sit down,” ordered Kendal.

The train rocked violently from side to side, forcing the boy to be thrown back into his seat. Barely moving, Kendal hovered over the lad.

“She told us her name’s Sam,” confessed the boy, cringing. “Trying to con onto her I used every trick I know. I couldn’t even find out her last name. All I know she’d plan to get off at Riddles Creek.”

“Smart girl,” advised Claire, walking towards the group. She stood behind Kendal holding onto a seat.

“Please, Miss, I’ll handle this. I’m a detective; I don’t need any help from a common rail commuter.”

“Excuse me for the attitude, I’m a school teacher. I’m interested in the welfare of the boys.”

“What subject do you teach?”

“English, if it’s any of your business.”

“Good, you might be able to help these louts after all. Teach them how they should treat young ladies.”

“I think I’ll send a report to your superiors on how badly you’re treating these nice boys.”

Kendal pushed his hand into his pocket, pulling out his mobile phone, pretending to tap the numbers on the keypad. After counting to five he began a fictitious conversation.

“Captain Hughes, Kendal, there’s someone who wants to talk to you so she can lodge a complaint.” He handed over the phone, waving Claire towards the other end of the carriage. Re-focusing on the group of boys, Kendal continued his interrogation. “Squeal the Goss on what you know. Be warned; don’t leave a single word out.” He glanced at Claire pretending to talk into the phone. He beckoned her over. “Seeing how you teach English you must be good at dictation. I need you to write every word these boys speak.” He thrust a small notepad and pen at her.

“Every day we ride the train looking for a girl to chat up,” spat the tallest of the boys. “We take it in turns. Two days ago it happened to be my turn. Whosoever turn it is, fails to score they have to keep trying till they succeed.”

“Why play stupid games on girls?”

The boy shrugged. "It's only for kicks. It gives us something to do."

"You should be at school preparing for your future," instructed Claire.

"School will give you a good go in life. If you obtained a good education I wouldn't need to talk to boys like you."

"You'd be a redundant cop," jeered the smallest of the group.

"Drop the attitude. I have enough to do even if I didn't have to talk to you. I'll let you in on a little secret. In a few weeks, I'm going to be chasing a killer. He murders seven times in seven days then he has seven years off. If he's not stopped before he takes a rest his next victim might be one of you. Understand what I'm saying?"

The boy shrugged his shoulder again. Attempting to stand the rocking of the train pushed him back onto the seat.

"If you were good at school one day you might become a cop. Maybe one day the streets will be safe."

The lad stared directly at Kendal. "I understand what you mean. Sam, the girl you're looking for told me to go away. Just before the train left the last station before Riddles Creek she jumped off."

"Do you want to add anything else?" asked Kendal, eyeing each of the lads suspiciously.

The boys shook their heads as the train pulled into the last station before Riddles Creek.

"This is your lucky day. Go back to school; get a future. A word of warning, if I even hear the slightest rumour you've been harassing a single girl again, so help me, I'll personally hunt you down just so I can throw you in prison. They like young fresh meat inside the prison walls," growled Kendal.

The tallest of the four lads stepped up to the two girls. "On behalf of my mates we apologize. None of us meant to upset you. We promise never to harass you or any other girls from this moment on."

The girls stood so they could meet the boy's stare. "Jake, it's about time you woke up to yourself."

The girls pushed their noses into the air before sprinting off the train.

The lads sent Kendal a cursory glance, shrugged and stepped out of the carriage.

Still shaking his head Kendal and Claire stepped onto the platform. "Boys, don't leave town, we might need to have another chat," yelled Kendal.

The boys glared at the man in the long black duffel coat before sprinting off in four separate directions.

"The lecture you gave should have scared them into behaving," reported Claire. "Hell, it scared me."

"Let's hope so."

Kendal led the way off the platform. He watched the train depart before looking at Claire. "Do you feel up for a walk?"

"How far do you think it is to Riddles Creek?"

"At a guess, I'd say one and a half kilometers."

"Good, I missed my early morning run today," hinted Claire.

Beginning to study the area, Kendal snorted at the idea.

The station was fifteen minutes out of Riddles Creek and surrounded in dry dense bush. The temperature already felt warm. The ground looked to be a tinderbox. A carelessly discarded cigarette or lit match could easily set the scrub on fire. Weeds were growing wild next to the two metal rail tracks. On the other side of a rusting barbed wire fence, wedged between two trees Kendal discovered an old burnt out car body. Where a bush fire once roared through the area some years back the bush looked to have reclaimed some of its beauty.

The two detectives made their way to a small square dilapidated brick building. The only window was on the side closest to the train platform. The few shards of glass littered the internal floor. The bars over the window were almost rusted through. A bird, startled by their presence took flight. It flew out of the broken door on the other side. The building's solid hand cut red bricks were weather washed. Each brick looked on the verge of crumbling from the weight of the rusting tin roof.

"Not a strong prison if Sam had been in there," mentioned Claire, clapping the dirt from her hands.

Kendal jumped down from the train platform. Looking up and back down the tracks, he searched for any sign of life. "I believe Sam walked along the train line."

"Why do you think you're right?" questioned Claire.

"If I were a kid I'd walk the tracks."

"What about the narrow dirt trail leading off into the scrub?"

"Sam's a girl. I'm sure she'd have been thinking about snakes."

Claire jumped down from the platform, punching him in the shoulder.

"What did I say wrong?" Kendal asked, massaging his shoulder.

"Sam's a girl," she bellowed. "Why say such a thing?"

"All I'm saying is a child who doesn't want to be bitten by a snake probably walked along the rail line."

"Brainy one, Sam has been a street kid for quite a while; I don't think she'd be too afraid of a snake. Don't forget she lived in Riddles Creek all her life. By my reckoning she'd have seen her fair share of snakes."

"You have a point. Do me a favour, hunt around the area to find a clue. I'll ring Tegan to see if she'd do the same as Sam."

"It'll be interesting to find out the difference between a country girl come street kid and one from the city," quizzed Claire.

Kendal pulled the phone from his pocket. In a few seconds, he'd brought up his daughter's mobile phone number. After hearing the seventh ring, a girl's voice answered in a whisper.

"Dad, I'm in school. I can't talk now my teacher is giving me a murderous look."

"How come you're at school? Claire informed me it's a lay day."

"It is except for those students who might like to do extra study."

"Is your teacher still staring at you?" asked Kendal.

"Yes. She's also walking my way."

"Put her on."

"Do you think it's a good idea?"

"Yes, trust me."

“Dad, my teacher’s name is Miss. Hutchins.”

Kendal heard a jumble of words then a woman’s voice came over the phone.

“Before you say something you might regret, Miss. Hutchins, I need to ask Tegan a question. I’m Detective Sergeant Alan James Kendal, Melbourne homicide. Actually, I’ve a more defined question.”

“I’m not happy you have disrupted my class, detective.”

“I’m sure I can put a smile back on your face if you’ll allow me one minute of your time.”

Miss. Hutchins started to tap her foot on the floor. “Okay, I’ll listen to what you have to say. You have thirty seconds.”

The woman listened intently to Kendal’s idea. She even managed a smile.

“Thank you for your time. I’ll call back in five minutes for the answer.” Kendal slapped his mobile phone shut, walking over to Claire. “Did you find anything of interest?”

“Nothing, it’s like the station hasn’t been in use for years.”

“Try decades.”

Kendal walked over to the burnt out car. Looking through the broken side window he found a snake coiled up in the back seat.

“Obviously, this car has been dumped up to twenty years ago.”

Claire wandered over. “If not thirty,” she boasted. “Maybe there’s a dead girl in the trunk?”

Kendal twisted the boot handle. The boot opened easily. “I’m surprised,” he remarked.

“How easily the boot opened?”

“No, the boot cavity is empty. In all the crime movies there are always clues in the boot.”

“Sugar, you watch too much TV.”

Together the two detectives walked around the area looking for anything which might give them a clue if indeed Sam got off the train like the boys claimed.

“Claire, if you exited a train out here, other than walking along the tracks how could you get to town?”

“Call a cab.”

Kendal rolled his eyes.

“Sugar, I’m kidding.” She pointed to the dirt road not more than thirty metres from where they were standing. “I’d walk along there. The moment a car came past I’d batter my eyelids just so I could get a lift into town.”

“Seeing how you’re built like a greyhound I thought you’d run.”

“Sarcasm won’t invite me into your room tonight,” mumbled Claire, scrunching her nose.

“We’ve been through this before. I’m married.”

“I know. What a challenge.”

Kendal shook his head. Extracting his mobile phone from his pocket, he tapped in his wife’s phone number. After a short pause, she answered. “Marg, after school today please come to Riddles Creek to pick me up. We’ll stay overnight in the best hotel they have. I’ll catch you up at seven, thanks, bye.”

“You’re such a loving husband,” taunted Claire.

Kendal gave her a cursory glance before ringing Tegan. The phone jingled four times before a woman answered.

“Hello, Mr. Kendal.” The tone of voice sounded timid at best.

“Miss. Hutchins has the class given their answer to my question?”

“Yes, they have. Before I tell you, I’d like to ask you one.”

“Sure.”

“Why do you need an answer from the kids? If you’re a clever detective, and I believe you are, couldn’t you work it out yourself?”

“Miss. Hutchins,” interrupted Kendal. “Thanks for the compliment. There are times in life when you need a child’s perspective on things. Do you agree?”

“I take it this is one of those times. Care to elaborate?”

Kendal paused for a moment to consider the pros and cons of her question. “No. I don’t want to disregard any information which might hamper the case we’re working on. However, Miss. Hutchins, I will give you a skeleton idea.”

“Forgive me for being nosy; I didn’t know you have a partner. I thought Tegan mentioned you work alone?”

“It’s a long story for another time.”

“I’d be more than interested in hearing it one day.”

“One day I’ll sit down to write it in my memoirs,” echoed Kendal, starting to become agitated at the prolonged hesitation. “The clock is ticking. I’d like to hear the answer to my question. I’m trying to locate a missing girl. Tegan knows the street kid. She calls herself Sam. She decided to go home. Now she’s missing. She left the train one station before Riddles Creek. I want to find out if she’d walk along the train lines or walk along the road into town?”

Miss. Hutchins’ eyebrows shot up, glancing about the room. Her face took on a slight reddish tinge. Each class member switched their attention from Tegan to their teacher.

“I surveyed the children. They all chose to walk along the road,” she stammered.

“What did Tegan say?”

“Your daughter has advised me she’d walk along the rail tracks.”

“Miss. Hutchins, thank you for giving up ten minutes of your time.”

“It’s always a pleasure to help the police. Please, before you hang up, tell me the correct answer?”

Kendal chuckled. He knew she lied about being thrilled to help the police. However, he didn’t want to press the point. “There is no correct answer.” He closed his mobile phone, burying it in his pocket. “Partner, let’s begin our walk into town along the tracks.”

“Sugar, I thought you’d go with the majority and walk along the road?”

“The kids in Tegan’s class think like city folk. You’ve already mentioned Sam is a country girl living on the street. She told Tegan, she and the ‘Night Creepers’ were of the same batch. They roamed the streets to survive. Tegan has a more reliable view on how Sam might think. Besides, if I were independent like Sam, I don’t think I’d want to be seen. I need you to check the right-hand side of the tracks. I’ll check the left-hand side.”

Staring at her partner’s sarcastic grin, Claire began to scour the bush. Five minutes into the walk she stopped, put her hands on her hips and watched the man walking away from her.

Kendal's eyes were studying the tracks and the surrounds as if they were searching for a needle in the dirt.

"Sugar, isn't this romantic?" she quipped. "You, me, the bush and a long straight rail track. What more could a girl ask for?"

"You'd never be comfortable in a place like this," blurted Kendal.

"Why not? This is nature at its best."

"There's not enough excitement, not to mention there's no running water for a bath. I've heard the nightlife is a bit on the dull side too."

"True," mumbled Claire, pouting.

The two detectives walked on for a further ten minutes. Claire suddenly veered off, walking towards a small bush four metres from the tracks.

"Sugar, I have a tissue wedged under this bush. It looks fresh." She picked up the tissue by the edges and started to unfold it.

"Hold it, Claire," called Kendal, running over. He re-folded the tissue, placing it in a small plastic bag he carried in his pocket. "We can send it off to pathology for analyses. If this tissue belongs to Sam they can do a DNA test on it. We'll ask her parents for a hair sample. Hopefully, they'll match."

"Shouldn't we assume the tissue belongs to Sam?" questioned Claire.

"Yes and I also believe we're headed down the correct path."

Finally completing a thorough search of the area, they discovered a distinct footprint in the dirt.

"This particular footprint is quite large," reported Claire.

"The only other print is this partial one, it looks a lot smaller. The rest have been rubbed out."

"Or disturbed," added Claire.

"If someone drove along the dirt road, saw Sam walking into town, they might have stopped here, waited for her to walk past, grabbed and dragged her towards a waiting car," blurted Kendal.

"It could explain the scuffed dirt near the bush."

"I believe Sam is in Riddles Creek somewhere."

"Sugar, I don't mean to put a break on your thoughts, I hear a truck coming." Claire sprinted back to the road to push her leg out.

The truck quickly stopped. The air brake hissed a moment before a stocky man wearing shorts and a white singlet stepped down from the semi. Inked pictures of trucks were heavily tattooed on both arms. The word 'Crystal,' appeared to have been inked on his skin above his left elbow years earlier.

"Giddyay," called the trucker. "You need a lift into town?"

"We sure do," answered Kendal stepping from behind a large tree.

The man's face erupted into a grin. "Do you know it's illegal to hitch a ride? You could meet foul play out here. Your bodies might never be found."

"Interesting thought," replied Kendal. "It's good to see you Jeff Arnold; Listening Man."

"Like-wise. Come on, hop in, Riddles Creek isn't far."

The three clambered up into the prime mover, settling back into the seat.

“The dashboard has more buttons than I’ve ever seen. Do they all have a task?” asked Kendal.

“They sure do. This is my baby. She’s computerized to the hilt.” The engine roared making the truck ease away from the tracks. “I bought the prime mover two years ago. Already she’s done nine hundred thousand kilometers.”

“It’s a long stint in the driver’s seat,” commented Kendal.

“I’m proud to say she’s never missed a beat.”

“How does your wife feel about you being away from home for long stretches?” asked Claire.

“She doesn’t like it, but a man’s got to work.” As LM slotted the gear stick into the next gear he glanced sideways at Kendal. “Tell me something. Why on earth were you walking the train line?”

“We’ve received a lead Sam might have gotten off at the last station before Riddles Creek.”

“I’ve checked along the lines. There’s no trace,” advised LM.

“What’s the time differential since you came through here?”

“If you’re asking how long ago I completed a search of the tracks, I came through here a couple of hours ago. I thought if Sam jumped from the train due to trouble, I might discover her body.”

“Did you?” asked Claire.

“No. I guess I should be thankful.”

The rest of the trip was completed in silence. The truck pulled in at the first hotel. Both detectives jumped out.

“Thanks for the lift,” grunted Kendal, looking up at LM. “We’ll keep in touch.”

“If there’s any way I can help, please let me know.”

“I need Sam’s hairbrush.”

“I’ll go find it.” LM sniffed back a tear. “I know you’re doing everything you can to find my daughter. If you want me I’ll meet you at the local pub. I’ll be there the second the phone rings.”

The trucker gave a short sharp nod as if he signaled a goodbye and drove off.

“Strange man,” commented Kendal.

“I thought he was strange back at Police Headquarters.”

“He’s either in this mess up to his cap or he’s a real saint.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

SPYING AN old wooden clad building on the opposite corner from where they were standing, Kendal escorted Claire across the road. Pushing on the swinging wooden framed door he heard a squeak coming from the rusting hinges. Under his feet, a floorboard creaked.

Kendal expected to see two men, guns hanging from their hips drinking and playing a card game. Any moment the game might end by one of the players yelling the other cheated. There'd be a gunfight. The undertaker will burst into the room to measure the size of the deceased man for a coffin.

Instead of the western fantasy Kendal spied a young man reading a magazine. He dug his nose out of the page to watch Kendal and Claire walk towards the rear of the hotel.

Few people were seated. Two were playing pool on a worn three-quarter size billiard table. At the counter, a tall man looked to be asleep over his empty glass of beer he consumed recently.

"This case is baffling," mentioned Claire, looking comfortable in the back corner.

"Partner, I couldn't agree more," replied Kendal, sliding into the seat opposite her. "Before each case, I have a dream about it."

Claire gave him a doubtful look. "What did you dream about?"

"The dream didn't make a lot of sense. So far nothing seems to add up. There has to be more to all this than a missing kid. If I remember the opening scene correctly, we're a long way from the beach."

"Maybe you remembered it wrong. Perhaps you were in a pool," taunted Claire.

"I was definitely in sea water."

Claire leaned back from the table. "You're right; this whole case doesn't make sense. I'd like to know how a teenager could have gone missing and no one knows a damn thing."

"We're either following a cold lead or we're in the wrong part of the country."

"What about GP. He's been quiet of late."

"I've no idea. I think I might have to place a personal ad in the newspaper, requesting a meeting," hinted Kendal.

When LM entered the pub he strolled to the counter. He nodded at the barman who poured him a drink.

Claire walked over to the man. "Excuse me, Jeff Arnold, alias Listening Man. May I have a word?"

Kendal strolled over. "You resemble a man deep in thought."

LM followed the two detectives to the rear of the pub. He slid onto the seat opposite Claire and Kendal.

"Care to speak whatever it is you're thinking about?" asked Kendal.

"No."

"Why not?" asked Claire.

"A wise man likes to listen to people."

"Do you classify yourself as a wise man?" asked Claire.

"My thoughts are what they are."

"What does your wife think about Sam being missing?" asked Kendal.

"Naturally, she's devastated."

"Has she been out looking for her?"

LM leaned forward in his chair. "What are you implying?"

"Nothing, I merely asked a question," stated Kendal.

"I don't like the tone in your voice."

“Why?”

“When I drove off after dropping you two at the corner I got to thinking. I take back what I said before about you’re doing all you can to find Sam. It’s a dead giveaway you don’t give a shit.”

Kendal leaned forward in his chair, staring directly into the man’s eyes. “You asked me for help. I’m here to find Sam.”

“Tell me why you’re not out there looking for her?”

“I’m trying to discover a strong lead.”

“I’m sure you won’t find one sitting in the local pub, drinking.”

“Jeff Arnold, all roads lead to you,” advised Kendal.

“Detective, I can assure you I didn’t bump Sam off and bury her somewhere in the bush. If I did I’d never ask the police for help. Here’s some background information to absorb into your intellect. I’ve never asked for help from a single person in my entire life. To walk into a cop station, pleading for someone to find my daughter is a huge task for me. Crystal begged me to go. I told her to forget the idea. She insisted. Soon I will go home. I’ll tell her I’d been correct all along about not listening to her reasons why I needed to involve the police.”

LM downed his drink. Slamming the glass on the table he stood.

“Go back to the city. I’ll find her myself.”

Kendal studied the room to make sure nobody was listening into their heated conversation before continuing.

“I’ve discovered through a reliable source Sam boarded a train to this out of the way place. I also found a tissue on the ground.”

LM hovered over the two detectives. He looked lost in a world he couldn’t find the way out of. Sitting, he bowed his head.

“Sam and I didn’t get along. It’s nothing either of us did wrong, we just didn’t get along. One night she packed a small bag and snuck out the window. I haven’t seen her since.”

“Has there been a phone call from someone asking for a ransom?”

“No. My mobile has been silent.”

“What about your home phone?”

“Not as of five o’clock this morning. Crystal and I haven’t been home. We’ve been out searching.”

To lighten the conversation Kendal changed the subject. “I’ve been meaning to ask, why do you call yourself Listening Man?”

The man jerked to attention. “It’s my call sign.”

Claire looked puzzled.

The man grinned. “My CB radio name is Listening Man.”

A tall thin blonde haired woman entered the pub. The moment her blue eyes caught sight of Jeff Arnold, she marched over.

“LM I knew you’d be here.” She wrapped her arms around his deep torso, hugging him tight. Glancing at the two detectives she said. “Hello there, I’m Crystal, LM’s wife.”

LM stood. Using one hand he swept the woman off her feet, kissing her passionately.

Crystal’s mobile phone shrilled, lighting up the inside of her pocket. She answered it on the third ring.

“Sis, I’ve just heard the news from the transport boss. Has LM told you he quit Diode transport?”

“Is it true you finally told your boss where to shove his job?” asked Crystal focusing watery eyes on LM.

The big man nodded slowly. “Not much gets past your sister. She’s the eyes and ears of the company. It’s true. I feel a change of direction might be what you and the kids need. All those years on the road has slipped past us. I want to spend quality time with you and our kids. I want the four of us to be a proper family.”

Crystal hugged her husband for a long time before sitting at the table.

“If only we could send Sam a message to tell her the good news, I’m positive she’d come home. I’m sure we’ll get along. We just need to have a good talk.”

“I’m sure your daughter would be home in a flash if she were able,” mentioned Kendal.

LM officially introduced his wife to the two detectives. The three shook hands.

“Thank you for coming,” chirped Crystal. “I’m happy my husband listened when I told him we needed help in finding our daughter.”

“Claire and I will do our utmost to locate her.”

Kendal stood, shaking LM’s and Crystal’s hand. Escorting Claire outside, Kendal lifted his mobile phone from his pocket, punching the numbers to Police Headquarters.

“Hughes here.”

“Cap, Kendal, I need a policewoman to look exactly like a thirteen-year-old. Who’s available?”

“There isn’t anyone who looks young enough.”

“There has to be,” growled Kendal. “What about the new rookie cop, what’s her name?”

“Constable Alicia Adams.”

“What about her?”

“She rolled her ankle and broke her toe jumping from a wooden fence when chasing a burglar three days ago.”

“There must be someone?”

“No one I’m aware of,” stated Hughes.

“What about any new recruits at the police academy?”

“I’m positive the commissioner will rule against the idea.”

“I’m desperate for someone,” moaned Kendal.

“You sound like a broken record playing a lousy tune. If you let me in on the Goss about Sam I might be able to think up an alternative.”

Kendal paused to consider the request before placing his idea on the table.

“The information Claire and I have dug up so far are that Sam did board the train to Riddles Creek. She went missing on the outskirts of the town close to the rail station.”

“I can see why you need a young woman cop. A thought has come to mind on your request. If we doll Claire up she could pass for an eighteen-year-old.”

“She needs to look a few years younger,” snarled Kendal.

“I’ll get back to you on the request. Sit tight. I’ll have a car pick you up.”

“No,” insisted Kendal. “If the kidnapper is in the area, I want to stay invisible. The next train heading for Melbourne is in two hours. We’ll snoop around a bit more before catching it, which reminds me, I have to cancel Marg. In about half an hour she’ll be on her way.”

Kendal dropped the phone back into his pocket after he finished speaking to Marg. Finding a taxi on the other side of the road he and Claire marched over.

“Do you know where LM lives?” asked Kendal, sliding onto the seat after Claire.

“Yes, Sir. This is your lucky day; his house is five minutes up the road. I just started my shift. I decided to stick around a few more minutes before driving towards Melbourne.”

“Lucky indeed,” mumbled Claire.

The dirt road leading to LM and Crystal’s house looked pockmarked from the recent bout of rain. Kendal paid the taxi driver and waited for him to drive away. He and Claire walked the last one hundred metres to the house. The wide fronted property wasn’t well maintained. Weatherboard cladding covered the outside walls of the house. It looked to be in desperate need of a few coats of thick paint. Parked in the drive Kendal studied the battered multi coloured four wheel-drive. A large prime mover, license plate number: ‘LISTMN’ took up the rest of the driveway.

“Short for Listening Man,” whispered Claire.

Kendal rapped his knuckles on the front door. Heavy footsteps came running. A few seconds later the door opened.

“I thought you were Sam?”

“Jeff Arnold, sorry to disappoint you, can we come in?” asked Kendal.

“Yes of course. Welcome. Can I offer either of you something to drink or eat?”

“Thanks, a coffee and a biscuit sound delectable.”

“I’m a health fanatic,” confessed Claire. “Plain water will do me.”

Crystal came trotting in from outside. “I’ll make something healthy,” she announced.

“I’ll give you the guided tour of the house,” blurted LM. He led the way down the short hallway, stopping outside the first room. “Sam’s room is at the end of the hall. You know her brother, Brandt, this is his room.”

“Yes, we’ve met,” confessed Kendal, stepping over the threshold.

The room appeared to be square shaped, neat and tidy except for a pair of blue jeans on the floor in one corner while a small flat screen TV perched on top of a chest of draws at the foot of the bed seemed adequate for a teenager.

“Your son’s not home?” asked Kendal, facing LM.

“He will be soon. He’s at school.”

“Good to hear he kept his word.”

LM chuckled. Behind the external hardened features, Kendal saw a caring handsome man when he let his guard down. “He told me he wanted to be a cop when he’s older.”

“I wonder who might have put the thought in his mind?” questioned Claire, sarcastically.

The group moved into Sam’s bedroom.

“Crystal has tidied up a bit so when Sam comes home she might be persuaded to stay,” reported LM.

Both Kendal and Claire didn’t look happy. The square room looked immaculate, dust free, the bed happened to be made, the floorboards swept and freshly ironed clothes were

placed neatly on the bed. A few teddy bears sat in one corner next to the flat screen TV which sat on a desk against the wall. The full-length mirror on the back of the door appeared to have been wiped clean. So too the pink curtains hanging over the window.

Kendal parted the fresh-smelling curtains to stare out over the rear of the property. In the background, he saw the tree line. Behind the trees, he spied the scrub where the train line snaked through Riddles Creek.

“The room’s neat and tidy,” he commented, looking over his shoulder.

“You sound disappointed,” said LM.

“Yes, we are,” answered Claire. “Any evidence which may have been left in the room will be contaminated.”

“What are you insinuating?”

“Nothing at all Mr. Arnold,” gushed Kendal.

“I suggest we walk back to the lounge.”

“Sam’s room certainly felt homely,” reported Claire, bringing up the rear. She glanced at her partner before focusing on the hand painted pictures hanging on the lounge walls.

“They’re all painted by Sam,” confessed Crystal, entering the room. She carried a plate full of sandwiches, a pot of coffee and a small jug of water on a silver tray. Smiling, she placed the tray on the coffee table.

Your daughter is a gifted artist,” gasped Claire.

Kendal walked over to admire the paintings. “She’s definitely got a talent.”

“Thank you. When she finally comes home I’ll let her know what you think. Sam believes the paintings aren’t any good. No matter how hard I try to convince her of the fact they are great, she won’t listen. I suggested she contact the local art gallery to stage an open day to display her work. I have to confess she’s a stubborn girl. I rescued all of these from the rubbish.”

Kendal felt particularly drawn to a water scene. The calm blue sea and puffy white clouds seemed to call him.

“The painting of Port Phillip Bay, is it for sale?”

“I suppose so,” replied Crystal. “I think if I actually sold one, Sam might be persuaded into thinking she could be a natural painter.”

Kendal pushed his hand into his pocket, plucking out his wallet. “I’ll give you forty dollars.”

“I’m sure Sam will be thrilled at the sale.” Crystal walked over, pulling the painting off the wall.

A chance to look at Sam’s room backed up by the sale of the painting saw the detectives saying goodbye at the front door. They waved at LM and Crystal on their way to the train station.

“The painting, why did you buy it?” quizzed Claire.

“It might be worth a lot of money one day.”

“Partner, under the duffel coat you wear, you’re made of mush.”

“Whatever you do, keep it a secret.”

“I now know your secret,” Claire whispered, puckering her lips. “If you kiss me I’ll keep it deep in my memory.”

“The reason I bought the painting is; I have a feeling there’s more to the picture than meets the eye.”

“Meaning?”

He shrugged. “The only thing I know is I must own this painting.”

“I suppose it’ll look good hanging off one of your walls for all to see.”

“I thought I might hang it in the study.”

“Sugar, I hope you’re not losing it.”

“Me, never, I’m one hundred percent sane. I’m in complete control of my faculties every second of the day.”

While the two detectives walked, Kendal studied the picture at length. Every few minutes he froze on the spot to bury his nose in the colour scheme.

“If we keep stopping we’ll be too late to catch the last train back to the city,” advised Claire. “I don’t think Marg will be too happy if you have to beg for a lift, especially after you’ve already cancelled her.”

Kendal grunted.

“What’s so interesting about the picture?”

“I have no idea. All I know I need to stare at it to unravel a clue.”

“Well if you can find the strength to look away for at least a minute the train is about to leave the station. On second thoughts, a hotel room for the night for the two of us might be what is in the cards?”

Kendal glanced at his partner, scrunching his nose. “Hold onto your thought. Let’s make a dash for the train.”

Shaking her head Claire sprinted after Kendal. They stepped into the train as the doors were closing, settling onto the first two seats.

“You stood me up,” grizzled Claire.

“Every time Sweets, I’m married. What did you say about cards?”

Claire wagged a finger at Kendal. “When you were created you stood in the workaholic line.”

Kendal chuckled before refocusing on the picture.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE MOMENT Kendal finished the last mouthful of his dinner he walked into his study, removed a small wooden plaque off the wall which read, ‘Home sweet home.’ Reaching up he placed Sam’s painting on the hook. He sat back in his chair staring at the meticulously painted scene.

“Nice painting of the Bay,” commented Marg, entering the study. She looked poised to help her husband stare at the painting.

“Marg, sorry, did you say something?”

The expression on her face depicted she felt somewhat disappointed he didn't realize she sat next to him.

"I said the painting you're staring at looks nice. Where did you find it?"

"Sam painted the picture before she disappeared."

"How come you have it?"

"I bought it."

"Why?"

"The moment I saw it I knew I must purchase it."

"The scene does look peaceful," confessed Marg focusing on the painting.

"A perfect summer's day," remarked Kendal.

"Don't tell me he's trying to be a poet?" giggled Claire, entering the room.

"I just happened to be wondering where you were," blurted Kendal, keeping his gaze locked on the painting. "It is kind of hypnotic, don't you think?"

"No," chimed the two ladies, in unison.

Kendal began to rub the stubble on his chin.

"He's thinking something," hinted Claire.

"I'm no poet. A perfect summer's day is what the painter named the painting. There are white fluffy clouds in the blue sky. The sea is flat, almost mirror like and there's a small white boat anchored in the middle of the bay with a single person fishing. He has two fishing lines in the water." Kendal's words trailed off into incoherent mumbles as he walked towards the wall. Stepping back to his desk, Kendal extracted a small credit card size magnifying glass out of the top draw. Marching across the floor he placed the magnifying glass over the boat in the picture so he could study it at length.

"Marg I think you should call the nut house, he's definitely lost the plot," giggled Claire.

"I heard your smart remark" stated Kendal.

Looking through the magnifying glass, he scoured the whole painting. Several minutes ticked off before he started pacing the floor.

"You, Alan James Kendal, are a weird man," chuckled Claire, shaking her head.

Kendal clicked his fingers sprinting back to the painting. "Tell me this, why do you think the boat has only one person in it? There are two fishing rods in the water."

"No idea," confessed Marg.

"He's a keen fisherman," chuckled Claire.

"Explain this; why is the fisherman a female?"

Claire stepped closer, squinting at the painting. "How can you tell? The figure has its back to us."

"I'm having a guess," reported Kendal, again studying the painting.

The two ladies stood wearing a doubtful expression.

"Claire, Marg, take a look at this. On the front of the boat, there's a white can. If you look at the back of the boat there's a second white can. On each can there are numbers. What's interesting, immediately after Sam's name she painted the letters SE."

"Meaning?" asked Claire.

Kendal sighed. "I've no idea."

“Maybe she visited South East Australia when she painted the picture,” hinted Claire, shrugging.

“I have doubts your theory has any merit,” wailed Kendal.

“If the numbers represent the date the scene was painted, the numbers are way off,” advised Marg. “Maybe they represent Sam’s age when she painted the picture.”

“I’ve seen these exact numbers somewhere other than this painting.”

Claire and Marg looked at each other before shrugging.

Kendal pulled his mobile phone from his pocket and dialed Police Headquarters.

“Constable Janet Miles, may I help you?” asked a woman at the other end of the line.

“Detective Kendal here, I need to know the phone numbers and the addresses of the following missing girls. Simone Grafton, Isabelle Neiman, Candice James, Kerry Dalton. The moment you find the information please email me. I’m at my home. My email number is in the police records.”

“Will do.”

“Thanks.” He slid onto the seat in front of the computer, waiting for the information to electronically arrive. Kendal looked at the surprised expression written across the faces of the two women. “I’ve a hunch,” he reported.

“Do you want to share it?” asked Claire.

“In due time partner,” advised Kendal. His confident expression relayed he’d solved the case.

Claire faced Marg. “He’s your husband.”

Marg chuckled. “He’s your partner.”

The information Kendal needed lit the computer monitor. He dialed the phone number of the first missing girl, sat deep in the black leather chair and took up a business like pose. Eventually, someone answered the phone.

“Hello.”

“Mr. Grafton, I’m Detective Kendal Melbourne Homicide.”

“Have you found my daughter?”

The man’s voice sounded rough. It took Kendal by surprise.

“Not yet.” Before he could continue, his words were drowned.

“I’ve wasted enough time talking to you cops. The only thing you do is talk. I want to see action. I want to hear you’re about to knock on my front door looking at my daughter standing next to you.”

“Mr. Grafton if you could give me a minute of your time I’m working on a hunch.”

“What’s so good about a hunch?”

“Right at this time a hunch is the only thing we’ve been able to uncover.”

“Forget the hunch, find my daughter,” he yelled.

Kendal knew by the tone in his voice the man had reached breaking point. He could have insisted on talking to Grafton’s wife. More than likely she’d be in a worse state. He needed to tread carefully. It was a tough time all round.

“Mr. Grafton, I’m not sure how to ask these questions, please, don’t take them the wrong way.”

“Tell me something Detective, how strong is this hunch of yours?”

“I’m hopeful I will find not only your daughter, I’ll locate the others who have gone missing.”

“Are you trying to tell me there are other missing girls?”

“I don’t usually give out free information. I need your solemn promise not to spread any rumours whether the news is true or not?”

“I won’t tell a soul.”

“Mr. Grafton I can’t stress this conversation enough. Secrecy is foremost. If I’m on the right path I don’t want the kidnapper to go into hiding.”

“Okay, Detective, I fully understand. If answering the questions you’ve thought up helps to find my daughter, ask away.”

“Is your daughter an artist?”

“She liked to paint pictures if that’s what you mean?”

“Do you recall her ever painting a picture of Port Phillip Bay?”

“No, she liked to paint animals. She wanted a career in cartoons.”

“No link there,” mumbled Kendal. “Do you have the latest painting she has completed close at hand?”

“Yes, I’m looking at it right now. I’ve hung it on the wall.”

“I know this might sound strange, I need you to do something for me. On the bottom right-hand corner where she signed her name are there numbers?”

“Yes. Four.”

Kendal leaned forward in his chair. “Do you have any idea why your daughter might paint numbers?”

“No, why should I? We never saw eye to eye. Maybe it’s the reason she’s missing?”

“It’s not my place to judge on who’s right or wrong. I’m following a hunch which I hope will help me find your daughter.”

“I apologize; I’m living on the edge over Simone’s disappearance. I feel it’s my fault.”

“When Simone comes home tell her how you feel. In the mean time Mr. Grafton, please think hard. Is there any reason you can think of why the numbers were painted?”

“I can’t think of a single reason.” The voice started to sound panic stricken.

“What about a previous house number?”

“We’ve always lived at this address. My wife even gave birth to Simone in this house.”

“Before your daughter disappeared did she mention she knew any of the other missing girls?” asked Kendal.

“I don’t think so. Do they go to the same school?”

Kendal started to feel the only lead he’d discovered had been severed. He certainly couldn’t shake the idea somehow each of the girls was connected by the numbers. “What about the combination to a locker at school?”

“Simone uses a key. I bought it at the local supermarket myself a few months back. What has numbers on a painting got to do with the disappearance of my daughter?”

“It could be nothing or it might be the most valuable piece of evidence I’ve been able to dig up,” stated Kendal. “I’ll let you in on my hunch. There are four girls missing. So far the only hint of a clue I have unraveled is your daughter and one of the other girl’s is an artist. On the painting I bought from the parents of one of the girls there were four numbers painted on

two white cans somewhere on the painting. To confuse the whole thought the artist painted 'SE' after her name."

"Not much of a clue detective. The numbers could mean anything or nothing."

"Those are my thoughts exactly. Can you do me a favour; have a close look at the painting. I want to find out if the same numbers have been placed somewhere else. I'll hold while you have a look. Please take particular attention to the middle of the painting."

Kendal began to pace the carpeted floor. Marg slipped into the kitchen to make a fresh round of coffee. Claire sat on a chair watching her partner. The only noise came from the bubbling kettle and the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall.

Eventually, Grafton's excited voice came through the phone. "I've located the numbers. They were in a tree, smack in the middle of the painting. 'SE' has been inscribed into the works after my daughter's name."

"What are the numbers?" asked Kendal.

"On the first can 3810 has been painted. On the second can, I've found the numbers, 14450."

"Thank you, Mr. Grafton, you've been a great help. I'll be in touch the moment I discover where your daughter is." Kendal hung up and dialed the next phone number. Eventually, he came to the end of his list. He gave Claire a side-ways glance. "Isn't it interesting all the paintings have the same numbers?"

CHAPTER NINE

POLICE HEADQUARTERS

CAP, HAVE you thought of someone who can masquerade as a young female?" asked Kendal.

"There's only one possibility," he replied sitting back in his chair.

"Who do you have in mind?"

"Before I say let me tell you what I've been thinking of."

"Spit it out," barked Kendal. "If it is a new rookie cop who has just joined the police force, she'll have to do. Bring her up to speed. We don't have time to waste."

Captain Hughes whispered the girl's name.

Kendal always prided himself on having great hearing. This time, the words were spoken in a way he couldn't hear. He gave Hughes a blank look. "You'll have to say the name again. I didn't quite catch what you mumbled."

"I believe Tegan is our first choice."

Kendal glared at the man through murderous eyes. He pounded his fist on the tabletop. "No," he growled. "There is no way I'm even considering the idea. I'm not using my daughter for bait."

“I can understand where you’re coming from.”

“You can’t know and you never will. I’ll resign before I’ll allow the stupid idea to come into play.” Kendal swiped his police badge out of his pocket, slapping it on the desk, staring at Captain Hughes in the eyes.

“You really don’t want to resign. Deep down you know there is no other way. Before you say another word, hear me out. Claire will be by her side the whole time. Both will be wired,” informed Hughes defensively. A trickle of sweat formed on his brow. Using the back of his hand he wiped the annoyance away.

Kendal stood to full height. He stepped back dragging the chair. “Don’t we have a female cop who looks young when dolled up?”

“Yes. However, they can’t look like a thirteen-year-old.”

Kendal’s murderous expression evolved into something monstrous as he threw his chair across the room. He commenced pacing the floor like a caged lion. He abruptly stopped to glare at Hughes. “What about my partner?”

Captain Hughes pointed his finger at Claire. “No offence, you’re too old.”

“None taken. Sugar, Tegan’s the logical choice.”

“There has to be someone. Hire an actor.”

“You know there isn’t anyone else,” chirped Claire. “Tegan effortlessly escaped the clutches of the pyromaniac, she can easily do this. I know I’m going to regret my words for the rest of my life; she’s exactly like you. One day she’ll be able to take over the reins. When you’re sitting quietly in a nursing home you can write your memoirs. I’ve thought up a title already. ‘The Kendal Chronicles.’ Sugar, don’t miss this opportunity. She’ll be fine. Besides, you’ll tag her. I know you’ll be like a shadow on the wall.”

When Hughes heard a knock on the door, he bellowed.

“Enter.”

Kendal’s family shuffled into the room.

“What’s this, a lynch mob?” jeered Kendal. “Marg, I thought you were waiting for me in the car?”

“Reinforcements,” she replied. “Claire and I knew how you’d respond. Captain Hughes ran the plan past me when you stopped for petrol. Tegan and I discussed it. At first, I screamed a definite no before Tegan put her case forward. I eventually agreed only if she guaranteed to do everything she is told. After all, I know you’ll be watching her every move like a hawk. What can go wrong?”

“There are a million things which can push this whole charade into a nightmare, derailing the whole idea.”

Tegan stepped up to her father. She looked him in the eyes. The tone in her voice never faltered. “Dad, if Sam is alive, this might be our only chance to get her back, besides, I owe her one for looking after me.”

Kendal looked at his wife through hurting eyes. His voiced sounded detached, splitting his view between detective, husband, and father. He swallowed the lump in his throat before erupting out of control by kicking out at another chair. It sailed through the air, ending at the window.

“Have you finished?” growled Hughes.

“I’ve only started warming up.”

“I’m sure glad you’re on the side of the police. I’d never want to meet your foul mood in a dark alley.” Hughes’ grin quickly faded the moment Kendal flashed him a thunderstorm expression.

“I have to agree with Tegan and Captain Hughes,” whispered Marg, her voice sounded soothing and calm. She flashed a grin, pushing her arms around her husband’s waist.

“How can you side against me?”

“I saw the look of anguish on the faces of the kidnapped girl’s parents. They’re distraught beyond belief. I never want to go through what they’re feeling right now. The few hours Tegan went missing, kidnapped by Patrick in Fire Games, was bad enough. I trusted in you to make sure Tegan remained safe. Sam’s parents have been living their nightmare for far too long. If there is a slim chance Sam or at the very least one of the missing girls can be found, I have to agree on the plan. You’re a great cop. In the end, it’ll work out. If I thought otherwise I’d make sure Tegan went into hiding.”

Kendal pulled the upturned chair into the air and sat. Bowing his head, he stared at the carpet.

Captain Hughes stood, walked to the window to look out across the impound yard.

“Kendal, I don’t know what I’d do in your situation. If I gave you some men for backup, could you be swayed in changing your decision?”

“No. I’m not interested in what any of you have to say.”

“I understand. Ladies, thanks for dropping by,” soothed Hughes.

Claire stepped forward. “I vote in favour of the plan. I’ll wear my white French cap. You know the one. It has a pink ribbon around the rim. So my vote is a definite yes.”

“There’s no need to vote. The answer is no,” advised Kendal, turning his back on the group. “The discussion is closed. Marg, Tegan, let’s go. It’s a nice day for a walk on the beach.”

“You won’t go anywhere near the beach,” growled Claire.

“Want to make a bet, partner?”

Marg lifted her hand, glaring at her husband. “If the undercover operation involved a different school girl, someone you weren’t connected to, you’d be making sure the plan went ahead. Am I correct?”

“The girl in question is our daughter.”

“Dad, you’ll be close the whole time. The entire Victorian police force will be on standby.” Using a school girl’s excuse Tegan blurted. “Victoria is for victors.”

Kendal felt weak in the knees. He knew he must say yes.

“I’d rather fight Patrick again in a burning house,” he quipped.

“Which just goes to show you are a control nut,” taunted Claire. “Face it, partner, you can’t stand the thought of someone else running the show. Admit it.”

“I’m a control freak only in police duties.” Kendal looked sideways at Marg. “Okay, you all win.”

“It’s not about winning,” stated Tegan. “It’s finding Sam and the other girls.”

Claire shook her head. “You’re so much like your father it’s sickening. So help me if Tani grows up the same way I’d have to deal with three Kendal’s. If it happens I’ll quit and admit myself to the nut house as a permanent inmate.”

Kendal extracted his mobile phone from his pocket, lifting it to his ear. “It’s time to come in.” He replaced the phone deep in his pocket, staring at the bewildered faces of his family. “I knew I’d lose this round so I’ve already hand-picked a team to help.”

Claire stepped forward, punching him in the arm. “You gave us all hell for nothing?”

“In a manner of speaking; yes. I thought it might be fun to see all of you squirm. I’d love to think of another way, I just can’t. Claire, you’re right, I love being in control.” He ducked another punch before stepping close to his wife.

“Alan Kendal, everything will be fine,” advised Marg, watching the door to the office open.

“I know. I’ll be in control.”

“I feel a headache coming on,” mumbled Hughes, slumping deep into his chair.

Kendal swiped his police badge from the tabletop, burying it deep in his coat pocket. He faced the two men and two women under-cover cops. For the next hour, they studied the plan in detail. After a constant flurry of ideas, the group sat back.

“In four hours the train will depart Southern Cross Station, its destination is Riddles Creek. Claire and Tegan will be on the train. I’ll be shadowing the last carriage in my car,” reported Kendal.

“Keep a sharp look out for anything which shouldn’t be there,” added Hughes.

“Don’t you worry, Sugar, Tegan will be in my sight every second. Not a hair on her head will be harmed.”

Kendal exhaled the last of his doubt before standing to full height. He winked at her then hugged his daughter.

“Take no risks. Listen to everything Claire says. Don’t forget you’re not wired. I’ve thought through the idea extremely carefully. If you’re wearing a wire and it’s discovered by the kidnapper you and Claire will be in extreme danger.”

“Dad, I won’t forget. I’ll be fine. Claire is the best cop after you.”

“I’ve one last word. You might think you’re the best at the spinning game. Let remind you this isn’t a kid’s game.”

“Dad, I know the spinning game is only practice. You inform the family every time we play. It’s just a bit of fun. Spin three times and see what you can use to escape a bad situation. It worked against Patrick in Fire Games it’ll work in this situation if the need arises.” Tegan let go of a huge grin and patted her father’s shoulder. “Having Claire by my side and you not far away, what could possibly go wrong?”

Wearing a grin, Marg lowered her gaze to the floor.

“What’s the smirk for?”

“Tegan is growing up to be just like you,” she taunted lifting her gaze.

“I hope to live long enough to say I’d been completely wrong in having any doubts,” grumbled Kendal.

Claire burst out laughing. “Before you say those words I want a tape recorder.”

CHAPTER TEN

CLAIRE WALTZED into the small shoe repair shop located at the corner of Flinders and Elizabeth Streets in the Melbourne CBD. Stepping up to the counter she started to drum her red painted fingernails on the glass top. The young male shoe repairer looked up from his work.

“How are my shoes coming?”

Walking over the man adjusted his brown leather apron.

“Finished,” he reported retrieving a pair of black runners from the draw directly under the cash register. He handed them over, frowning.

“Is there something wrong?” asked Claire.

“No, nothing is wrong.”

“What’s the look for?”

“I’ve repaired lots of things over the years. Your request to actually hollow out both heels in brand new runners fifty millimeters long to a depth of seven millimeters is the strangest thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“If you can keep a secret I’ll show you what the runners will be used for.”

“I take it you won’t be using them for running. I have to admit you don’t look like you need the exercise.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” chirped Claire.

The young man glanced around the shop to make sure nobody else decided to enter before leaning on the counter. “I don’t suppose I could give you a phone call so I can organize a date sometime in the near future?”

“You certainly come straight to the point.”

“In my line of business time is important. Gorgeous women like you are only in my store for a few minutes.”

“A date is possible.”

“Name’s Grant.”

Claire reached for her police badge, slapping it on the counter. “I’m Detective Claire Ambroso Melbourne Homicide.”

The twenty-two-year-old man raised his hands. “Everything’s cool, something’s are better left unanswered.”

“It’s okay, don’t stress. My explanation will save you from thinking about the answer for the rest of your life.” Claire reached deep into her pocket, pulling out two identical size razor blades. She watched Grant’s eyes start to bulge. “A female cop can never be too careful. Ever since I needed to cut my way through a rope using a glass fragment I’ve been thinking of a way which could be more useful if the situation ever arose again. A cavity in my shoes might be just what I need.” Slipping one blade into each shoe cavity she screeched. “There, a perfect fit.”

“I’m speechless.”

Claire dropped another two pairs of closed in high heeled shoes on the counter under the man's nose. "I'll come back for those next week; just put the lot on my tab. Here's my mobile phone number for our date." She swiped the man's business card from off the counter, battering her eyelids, waiting for the man to nod before swiveling on her toes and marching off. At the door to the shop, she looked seductively over her shoulder. "Grant if you decide to call me for a date, I'm always available."

"I'll keep you to it." Grant kept up his grin long after Claire disappeared into the stream of people walking along the mall.

By the time Claire stepped out into the sunshine she found Kendal parking the car across the street. For several moments she watched him sitting behind the steering wheel, lost in his thoughts.

Right in the middle of discussing several different scenarios in case things were to go wrong on the train trip, Kendal froze in midthought as he stared out of the window at a woman dressed in a nurse's outfit, walking towards the tram stop.

'Patrick always made sure he thought up a perfect plan B.'

Kendal's thoughts were so active he barely recognized the tune on his mobile phone. Nearing the end of the shortened song he instinctively swiped it from his pocket.

"We need to have a talk," urged the voice. The tone sounded ice cold. It took Kendal completely by surprise.

"I don't recognize your voice."

The man gave a quick sharp chuckle. "I'll forgive you. It's been a while since we last talked."

Flipping through phone numbers and faces in his mind like a computer, Kendal came to a name. He blurted out a quick sentence. "GP, you're right it has been a while."

"Good save."

"You caught me thinking about others things."

"Another good save. Do you want to share your thoughts?"

"I'm about to do something I don't want to live to regret," whispered Kendal.

"I'm intrigued."

"I'm sure you are. What's the urgency for the phone call?"

"Detective, you need to watch your back. If I were the sniper who almost killed you, I could have easily walked up to the window of your car and whispered goodbye."

"You have a point."

The next chuckle lasted longer than the first.

"State your phone call. Which I have to add, is against your rules of communication."

"You've reported a valid point. This is an emergency. I have a proposition."

"I'm open to suggestions," hinted Kendal.

"I like your comeback sentence. I think you're in need of some exercise."

The phone fell silent.

Kendal stepped down from the car. He walked towards the park across the street. It wasn't quite lunch time so the park looked almost deserted. Not even the usual joggers were about. He walked down the narrow path, spied a two seat bench under a large tree and sat.

A faint noise from over his left shoulder alerted him to someone close. Respecting GP's rules, Kendal stared at the jogger's path dead ahead.

"It's about time you showed."

"What you're planning has a few holes. What if I offered my services as an extra person on the train when Claire and Tegan go for a ride?"

"How did you know of my plans for the train ride?"

"I know everything."

"Patrick told me those exact words too once. Now he's dead."

"Yes, I took great interest in the case."

"Thanks for the offer. I must refuse. You might look too much like a cop."

"For a cop, you have a dry sense of humour," laughed GP.

"Don't take offense to my refusal. Part of me wants you on the train, the other part of me doesn't."

"Which part of you wants what?"

"My cop instincts say no. The father in me says yes."

GP nodded as if he understood.

Kendal started to probe a little. "Do you have any kids?"

"I'm not sure if I should say."

"What's the harm?"

After a minor delay, GP continued. "Yes, I have. My wife found out what I do for a living. Now she refuses to let me see them. I don't blame her."

"Maybe one day you could make amends."

"I doubt it. I'd never been any good at school. However I found out from an early age I was a great fighter. I've never met a man who could beat me in a fight. I'll respect your wishes. I'll be close by if you need me. Maybe one day you will need to upgrade to plan 'C'."

Kendal heard retreating footsteps. "GP, before you leave, did I mention I have some news you might find interesting?"

The footsteps returned.

"No, you didn't. I'm listening."

"There's a contract out on your head. I've been given a warning."

"I see. It's very interesting. I take it the messenger wasn't a cop."

"Correct."

"I'll dispose of the threat."

"What if you can't find the man?"

"I'll find him. It will be clean and swift." GP looked stony-faced. "I've relayed what I needed to say. Is there anything else you need me for?"

"Yes. The matter of Sam the missing street kid, tell me some good news. Tell me you have a clue on where she's been hiding?"

"Sorry, no can do. It's like she's fallen off the face of the earth. It's extremely rare I can't find even a scrap of information on someone. Come to think of it, I'm sure it has never happened before. I'll keep digging."

Kendal swore under his breath before grinning.

"What's the joke?"

“To use the words Patrick always preached, if plan ‘A’ doesn’t work there is always plan ‘B.’”

“For a cop, you’re a strange man.”

“Seeing how I’m talking to a hood, I’ll take what you said as a compliment.”

“Each to his own. I apologize for breaking off our little talk. Claire is almost here.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE TRAIN, departed Southern Cross Station in drizzling rain. Kendal shadowed the last carriage in a beat up old white Ute he took from the impound yard at the rear of Police Headquarters. The Ute sat stagnant in the yard for nearly two years waiting to be claimed from a relative of a dead man.

Kendal felt determined nothing bad will happen to his daughter or his second partner. Even though his first partner had been drunk when he started his shift, he was shot in a firefight. His death haunted him for months. If Claire and Marg didn’t help him through the dark times he’d probably be dead through alcoholism. The dusty whisky bottle remained unopened on the shelf in his study for a trophy. Every time he looked at the bottle he’d be reminded he emerged from the dark tunnel; mind intact.

Each of the seven stations the train stopped at from the city came and went uneventfully. Tapping a number on his mobile phone, Kendal lifted it to his ear.

“Constable Gileton, how goes?”

“Not even a stray dog on the road. Are you sure this is the right train and time when the girl disappeared?”

“Yes.”

“By my reckoning, there are only two stops to Riddles Creek.”

“Keep on your toes. Pass it on,” whispered Kendal. “I’ve a gut feeling something’s about to happen.”

The boys who harassed the two school girls when Kendal intervened on the train ride to Riddles Creek moved closer to Tegan. Claire watched them intently. The boys taunted away at Tegan, trying to stir a response. Tegan remained ice cold, ignoring the taunts at first. When the boys turned their backs to her she slipped along the seat for a closer listen.

The stockiest of the boys whirled around, staring directly at Tegan.

“Fellas, look what we have here. Hi, there little darling. I see you’ve come closer to me. I’m pleased you want to have a piece of the action.” The lad sat, placing his arm across the back of the seat directly behind Tegan’s head. “How come you’re not at school?”

Tegan glared at the teenager through narrowed slits.

“Has the cat ate your tongue?” He leaned closer. “I can’t tell if it’s true. Your perfect size lips are tightly closed.

Claire slipped into the next seat. Tegan lifted her hand in an attempt to hide her grin.

“What’s the joke?” asked the boy.

“You are.”

“So you can talk,” snarled a teenager at the back of the group. He pulled up his sleeves, revealing a tattoo of a skull. “You like the tat, sweet lips?”

“I think it makes you look stupid.”

Claire started shaking her head. Tegan clamped her teeth shut.

“I think you’re a little brat,” mocked the boy sitting next to her.

Tegan stared straight through him at two tall teenagers who looked a few years older than the eldest of the group of lads.

“Are these four harassing you?” asked one of the boys stepping over.

“Yes, they are.”

The boys stood to full height, pushing the group of four onto a seat. “Stay,” they barked.

“May we escort you to another carriage?” asked the first tall teenager.

Standing, Claire gave a sharp nod at Tegan. “I feel somewhat insecure too.”

“My mate and I will gladly escort you both to the next carriage. You’ll be safe sitting behind the driver of the train. He’s my father. One word from me and he’ll have the boys thrown off the train. These rough heads harass every girl they see.”

Tegan stood, linking her arm around his. Together they walked to the door, waiting for the train to rumble to a stop.

Claire and Tegan were ushered into the front carriage as the whistle sounded for the train’s departure.

“Both of you are safer than a church full of people on a Sunday morning,” hinted the lad, holding Tegan’s hand.

“Thanks,” replied Tegan. “I feel safer already.”

Claire frowned at the second boy sitting near the window while Tegan sat next to the teenager in a seat close to the driver’s door.

“Do you help a lot of girls?” asked Claire.

“Sure. Those boys know us as the vigilantes of the train. When they see us they run.”

“So you two are a gang?” quizzed Tegan.

“I guess so.”

“I couldn’t bring myself to call two kids a gang,” hinted Claire suspiciously. Looking out of the train’s window, she caught a glimpse of the white Ute Kendal chose to drive.

The rain appeared to be falling harder as the train slowed to a crawl. Kendal deduced Riddles Creek couldn’t be more than five minutes further on. He started to feel he’d wasted everyone’s time. He only just decided to call it a day when the train entered the tunnel. Pulling his mobile phone from his pocket Kendal commenced texting a message to Claire to chuck it in. He’d have to switch to plan ‘B’ and have an undercover policewoman for a second attempt on a different day. He almost pressed send when he froze. His finger hovered above the send key like a helicopter waiting for permission to land. He closed his mobile phone, slipping it back into his pocket, staring at the entrance to the tunnel.

“Surely it doesn’t take a train too long to travel the length of a short tunnel,” Kendal whispered. Placing the Ute’s gearstick into neutral, he pulled the handbrake on, counting to five before stepping down onto the road.

“Why have we stopped?” asked Tegan, staring out of the train’s window at the tunnel wall.

“The train always stops here at this time of day,” reported one of the boys.

“Why?”

“This train has to wait for the other train to slip on past. We pull over to the siding to wait. If it doesn’t, both trains will have a head on collision. If it happened the wreck might block the train line for hours.”

The boys walked off to the other end of the carriage. There was a scraping of metal and the train driver’s door opened. A figure stepped from the cabin wearing a balaclava over his head. He held a colt forty-five, pointing directly at Claire and Tegan.

“Good work boys. Here’s your cut and here’s the envelope for the other boys.” He tossed an envelope into the air. When it landed he watched the boys scoop the money from the carriage floor.

“So the scuffle between the four boys must have been all an illusion?” questioned Claire.

“You figured it out all on your own?” growled the train driver tossing two short pieces of rope at one of the lads. “Tie the woman real tight. I want to see her fingers turn purple. Do the same to the kid.”

Tegan and Claire were forced to sit on the floor of the train. The moment their hands were tied they were dragged to their feet. The door of the train opened. The wind from the tunnel caused Tegan’s hair to flap about her face.

“Both of you get off the train,” spat the man holding the handgun.

“I’m not about to do anything you say,” barked Claire.

“Move it or I’ll start shooting.”

“I’ve said this sentence before to a different hooded person. I’m not scared of you hoody,” shrieked Tegan, defying his order.

“Feisty,” spat the hooded train driver. “I like it. The price for both of you has just gone up fifty percent.” The hooded figure pointed his gun at one of the boys. “Ladies and I call you ladies only out of respect for the money I’m going to make. You have till I count to four to do what I say.”

“Isn’t it usually three,” whipped Claire.

The driver glared. “One and two.” He cocked the gun and pulled the trigger. The lad fell to the floor screaming. The figure re-aimed the gun at Tegan. She stared cold shark eyes at the man. “Move or the next bullet will be embedded in the young one. It’ll be a pleasure to count the money I get for both of you.”

The hooded man stepped forward, grabbing Tegan around the neck. Pointing the gun at her left temple he spat murderous words.

“Lady, if you don’t step down from the train right now I’ll shoot you and throw the young one to the ground. Kid, your imminent death will force your friend to do what I want. Aren’t I right, my lovely?”

Before Tegan could utter a word, she was pushed into Claire’s arms. They started to make a move.

“I knew I could convince you. The maintenance room is opposite the train door. Walk in and sit.”

As a deep rumble echoed throughout the tunnel, Claire jumped from the train, followed by Tegan.

“What’s the noise?” asked Claire.

“It’s your next ride. Now get into the maintenance room. You better hurry.”

The hooded man watched Tegan and Claire enter the small dirty room. He sprinted over, pulling the door shut. He turned the key in the lock, quickly climbed back into the train and sprinted to the train’s instruments, snatching a microphone from its cradle.

“All green,” he advised.

Outside the tunnel, the rain started to ease. Kendal glanced at his watch. He fidgeted in the silence, watching a rainbow form. Rechecking his watch he saw one train starting to emerge from the tunnel.

“It’s been exactly three minutes, where’s the other train?” he mumbled.

The hooded man unlocked the maintenance room. “Now the train to Riddles Creek has gone, climb the short step ladder into the train.”

“Where are we going?” questioned Claire.

“Towards Melbourne.”

Claire and Tegan climbed the short step ladder provided by the lad who’d been shot dead and stepped into the carriage.

“Take a seat,” snarled the hooded man. He dived behind the controls. In seconds the train recommenced its journey.

Kendal stepped down from his car and walked to the rusty barbed wire fence, guarding the way to the rail line. He was in time to witness both trains emerging from the tunnel at almost the same time; one at either end. He counted the passengers in the Melbourne-bound train before focusing on the train Tegan and Claire were supposed to be in as it rolled along the rails towards Riddles Creek.

“Something’s wrong,” he whispered lifting his mobile phone to his ear. “I’m sure the trains took too long in the tunnel.”

Claire’s mobile phone lit up like a Christmas tree. The boy who’d been shot dead stepped towards Claire.

“So the shooting was a ploy,” quizzed Claire, staring at the lad.

“You should have seen the look on your face when you saw me carrying the step ladder. If you were being judged for an academy award you’d win by a mile. You ate the whole story of my death like you were starving.”

The hooded man pushed the lad in the shoulder. “Drive the train.”

The lad stepped into the driver’s compartment, slamming the door shut.

The hooded man squatted, snatching Claire’s mobile phone from her pocket. “You will answer it. You will talk to whoever is calling. You will not say a word out of place or the young one will be shot. Understand?”

“Hello, Alan is this you calling?”

“Partner you know it’s me, is everything okay?”

“It sure is. The rain delayed the train. I’ll see you at home tonight.”

Ending the call, the hooded man tossed the mobile phone to the other end of the train.

“I’m not sure if you spoke a code or not? On this instance I’ll let you live, besides a pretty thing like you will fetch very big bucks.”

“If you want a ransom neither of our families are rich.”

“This isn’t about any ransom. This is part of my expertise in smuggling human females overseas. Be good or I’ll have no qualms in shooting either of you.”

“Won’t our deaths put a hole in your budget?” growled Tegan, struggling against her tethered wrists.

“It’ll be only a slight delay. There’s plenty more eligible girls out there. Overseas buyers will pay a fortune for the right ones.”

“What happens if they’re not satisfied over what you think might be the perfect specimen?” questioned Claire.

“They buy the girl. It’s up to them what they do. There are no returns.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

KENDAL SLID behind the wheel of the white Ute. Blue smoke billowed from the exhaust as he again took up shadowing the train into Riddles Creek. Before the train rumbled to a stop he stood on the cracked concrete platform, his gaze glued on the driver.

The train stopped. Kendal dived into the carriage. What he found made his blood pressure rise to fever pitch. Swiping his mobile phone from his pocket he stabbed Tegan’s number. As he waited for the satellite to open the line he searched the empty carriage. A noise from a phone under a seat saw him sprint to the other end of the carriage. In one angry swoop, he snatched it from the floor. Holding his two-way radio in a death grip he talked to his team in angry blasts.

“Did any of you pick out this train stayed too long in the tunnel?”

Silence marred the airways.

“I want everyone back to the tunnel, Claire and Tegan must have been thrown from the train. I want them both found. Philips, I need you at my side right now.”

Kendal threw open the driver’s compartment, staring down the driver. “Where’s my daughter?” he spat.

The wiry built train driver looked shocked at seeing the man in the black duffel coat. He started to stammer his answer.

Kendal grabbed him by the collar, dragging him off the train. “I don’t have time to repeat my question. Answer me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Kendal let the man crumble to the concrete, threw him on his stomach so he’d have to kiss the concrete and handcuffed him. “Philips look after this worm. Use every means necessary to get his confession. I’ll search the entire train.”

Philips watched Kendal sprinting for the train before turning his attention to the man cowering on the cold concrete.

“Be advised, if you haven’t spilled your guts by the time the man wearing the black duffel coat returns, the only thing stopping him from ripping your limbs from your torso is a prayer to the man upstairs. Believe me, when I tell you I will not be able to stop him.”

“I don’t know anything, I swear. I don’t know his daughter. My job is to drive the train. Please, you have to believe me. I done nothin’ wrong.”

Kendal came sprinting back, his mobile phone glued to his ear. “Has he talked?”

“He claims he knows nothing about Tegan or Claire.”

“Talk,” yelled Kendal.

A voice from Police dispatch came through Kendal’s phone.

“Constable Candice Graff, I need you to get onto whoever is in charge of the trains. I want them all shutdown, now. Call me back when you’ve found the person who has the authority.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I want every cop on the force to meet the train travelling to Melbourne from Riddles Creek. My team’s enroute.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Holding the mobile phone in a vice like grip, Kendal focused on the handcuffed man sitting on the cold concrete platform.

“You have two seconds to start talking,” he spat through gritted teeth.

“Like I’ve been trying to tell this man on my right, I don’t know what you’re referring to.”

Gripping his collar, Kendal yanked the trembling man to his feet before shoving his police badge at the man’s face. “Do you want to change your story?”

“No. All I do is drive the train.”

“Why stop in the tunnel?”

“I have to; I faced a red light.”

“Why were you seeing a red light?” yelled Kendal, still bellowing at the top of his voice.

“Three times a day I stop at the red light in the tunnel. The train heading back to Melbourne does the same thing. They switch the tracks. The other train goes then I go on the green light.”

“How long does it take?”

“Three minutes.”

“Has the delay been included?”

“Depending on which timetable sheet you look at. The new ones have been updated.”

“How long have you been driving the train back and forth from Melbourne to Riddles Creek?”

“Twelve years.”

“How long has this prescribed stop being implemented?”

“About three months. A bean counter in his wisdom must have thought they could save money by changing the timetable. Personally, I think it’s dangerous, but what do I know.”

“What’s your name?”

“I’m Mack Hinder.”

“Philips, take him down to Melbourne Police Headquarters and book him. Hinder, I’m arresting you on suspicion of kidnapping.”

“I did nothing wrong.”

Philips led Hinder towards a waiting police car when his mobile phone shrilled. Kendal lifted the phone to his ear, growling.

“Are you the one who makes decisions at Southern Cross railway station?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Have you shut the trains down?”

“I can’t bring every train to a halt unless I have written authority from the Commissioner of Police.”

“I don’t care. I’ll take full responsibility,” yelled Kendal.

“Sir, please calm down.”

“No, I won’t.”

“Detective Kendal, if the train from Riddles Creek is the only one involved, I’ll be able to slow it. However, I can’t stop it due to safety reasons.”

“Fair comment. Slow it down so my team can board the train before it arrives at Southern Cross Station.”

“I’ve been given a skeleton run down on the problem. If what I’ve been told is factual, our driver has completed the correct procedure,” stated the man at the other end of the phone.

“I don’t care about your procedures, slow the train. I believe my daughter has been kidnapped and is on your train.”

“I’ll slow the train as requested. ETA at Southern Cross station is about twenty minutes.”

Looking down the train line, Kendal dropped his phone into his pocket. Pushing the open button on his two-way radio he growled. “Team, intercept the train. You should be able to catch it a good five minutes before it arrives in Melbourne.”

“We’ll be there,” bellowed a determined voice.

Philips walked over, looking perplexed. “We’ll find your daughter and partner.”

Kendal beckoned Philips to accompany him to the police car. The train driver looked nervous. Kendal, half bent, looked the man in the eyes.

“I’ve a question. I want to see if you come to the same conclusion. The first train goes into the tunnel. It’s stopped by a red light. The second train enters the tunnel and slips past the other. You give the driver a wave then proceed to Riddles Creek while the second train travels to Southern Cross station back in Melbourne.”

“You have the whole picture,” growled the train driver. “Except for twice a week, I finish early. I swap trains and go back to Riddles Creek.”

Kendal un-cuffed the man. “We have your name and where I can reach you. Don’t leave town. Now go.” He watched the man walk off towards the train before turning to Philips. “I want a look at the tunnel. Let’s go.”

“Kendal why on earth did you let the train driver go free?” asked Philips.

“All in due time my friend; all in due time.”

The moment they entered the tunnel the two cops examined the walls and the tracks. Five metres in Philips spoke. “What are we looking for?”

“I’m sure Claire or Tegan would’ve left something to say they’d been here. It’s all part of the plan.”

“Are you trying to tell me everything up to date has been planned?”

“You have it in one.”

“The phone call to police dispatch?”

“It’s a part of my plan ‘B’”

“I almost stated there’s no way on this earth every train in Melbourne could be stopped,” hinted Philips.

“I’m happy you kept quiet. The train driver is up to his eyeballs in guilt. We just can’t prove it yet. We’ll wait for ten minutes so he can relax. When the man thinks he’s in the clear I want you to shadow Mack Hinder.” Kendal lifted his phone from his pocket, tapping ten numbers. When the ringing sound stopped he spoke. “GP, the two packages are on the move.” He heard a click and placed the phone back into his pocket.

“Who’s GP?” asked Philips.

“He’s a good friend who has offered to help.”

Halfway along the length of the tunnel, they stumbled across a rusty door in the side wall.

“This has to be a maintenance room,” mentioned Philips, reaching for the handle. The door creaked as it opened. He pushed his head inside the small cavity. “Not much in here,” he announced. “I see a few rusting lengths of metal, two wooden railway sleepers, and a few magazines.”

“A table and a chair,” added Kendal, pushing his way into the small room. He spun three times before glancing about the area.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s called the spinning game. My kids play it all the time.”

Philips raised his eyebrows.

“Long story. The short version is; you spin three times and say how you’d escape using only what you see.”

“Interesting, if you were a kid, I’m sure.”

Kendal ignored the taunt by studying the small room. “If Claire and Tegan were placed in this room they’d find something to leave as a clue.” Finding a cavity at the far end of the room between the wooden railway sleepers and the concrete wall Kendal walked over. “Look what I found. Tucked at the bottom of the hole is a piece of pink material.” Kendal picked it up so Philips could see it.

“What is it?”

“It’s a strip of pink material which fringed Claire’s cap.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

EXIT THE train at the next station. One false move and the young one gets dead.”

The hooded man stepped closer flashing a pair of brand new silver handcuffs.

“Did you find those in the pawn shop on Elizabeth Street?” chirped Claire.

“You are a very funny girl? It doesn’t matter a sixpence where I bought them, I know where they’re going.”

“Do you want us to join in on your secret or do we play twenty guesses?”

“Shut up lady. You’re starting to bore me.”

“Good.”

The hooded man stepped up, spinning Claire around. “I have a good mind to break your leg. One swift kick and your knee will explode like a squashed lemon. You’ll be in so much agony you won’t dare say another word.”

“Damaged goods is a bit extreme don’t you think?” quizzed Tegan.

“The young one has an intelligent head on her shoulders. Don’t make me bruise it. Young tender sweet chops will certainly fetch a great price.”

Handcuffs were snapped over of Tegan’s wrists before the rope which bound her was severed in two.

Claire received the same treatment.

“When the train pulls into the next station you will do exactly what I say.”

“You’re the boss,” stated Tegan, sarcastically.

A sudden jolt signaled the train had stopped. The door to the carriage opened automatically. Claire received a jab in the shoulder blade.

“Watch the merchandise pal,” she spat. “Bruising won’t look good.”

“Both of you shut up. There’s too much backchat. I’m not a patient person.”

Both Tegan and Claire stared at the hooded man.

“Now I have your undivided attention, I’m happy to announce the last girl who entered my trap sounded quieter than a lamb. So far she’s been the quietest. Now get into the van directly in front of you.”

“How old was the last girl?” asked Tegan.

“She can answer the question when you meet her.”

An hour of being bounced around the floor of the van took its toll on the two hostages. Tegan and Claire started yelling for the driver to take it easy a full minute before the van screeched to a stop.

“Get out,” growled the hooded man, sliding the door open.

“It’s about time you let us out of the cage,” taunted Claire. “Bruising on damaged goods is definitely not a good look.”

For her smart remark, Claire received a slap across the face.

“Big tough man hitting a handcuffed woman. I hope you’re proud of yourself?”

“I will be when I see my bank balance. All those zero’s after the number one makes me tingle all over.”

“Do me favour, point the gun at me. I don’t want to phone you in the middle of the night to tell you the young one is having a nightmare.”

“Where are we?” quizzed Tegan.

“Portsea.”

“We’re hours from Riddles Creek,” whispered Claire, spitting blood from her mouth.

The hooded man glared at his two trophies, grabbed a rope from the front seat of the van, pushing it through a link in the handcuffs.

”Don’t pout this rope is a dog lead. You’ll now walk along the track in front of you.”

“What will happen if we don’t co-operate?” asked Tegan.

“I’ll place this rope around the nearest tree and leave you for the rats to chew.” Shoving Claire in the back, he growled. “Start walking.”

The narrow trail looked sandy. Claire and Tegan could smell the sea. The tea-trees converged in on the trail making the scrub appear dense. A slow five-minute walk brought the group to a small clearing. Pointing his gun directly at Tegan, the hooded man stepped over to where several branches covered a metal door. He swiped them away using his free hand. Extracting a silver key from his pocket, he tossed it to Tegan.

“Both of you get over here. Girlie, unlock the door and open it.”

“Where are your manners? Didn’t your mother ever tell you how to talk to a young lady?”

“I was a ward of the state. As for manners, I don’t have any. Quit stalling. Both of you get your arse over here.”

Tegan and Claire walked over to the door. Tegan inserted the key into the padlock and swung the door open.

“There’s a small torch sitting on a shelf on the inside of the door. Turn it on.”

Tegan switched on the pencil size torch. The thin beam of light spied a girl about Tegan’s age cowering in the back corner.

The gunman grinned. “One false move and I’ll shoot one of you three. Say hello to your new home for a while. Get in.”

Tegan looked doubtful at their new lodgings. “How long will we be in here for?”

“If what I’ve planned goes exactly right, not long.”

“I don’t fancy living in there for any length of time,” spat Claire. “I won’t go.”

The gunman aimed his gun at Claire and pulled the trigger. Claire fell sideways onto the sand. He swung the gun around so it pointed at Tegan and pulled the trigger a second time. The man reached down, dragging them inside and roughly dumped them in the corner. Hovering menacingly over Claire, the hooded man reached into his coat pocket and produced a syringe.

“Let her be,” screamed the young girl from the back corner.

“Quiet or you’ll have the same treatment again.”

The hooded man buried the needle back into his pocket, stood and walked out of the shipping container, slamming the door shut.

The girl watched the two new arrivals in the dim light of the torch. Slowly she ventured over, hovering over the sleeping pair.

Eventually, Tegan opened her eyes. Struggling to a half sitting position, she stared directly into the eyes of a scared teenager who looked all too familiar.

“The people one meets in the strangest of places,” grunted the girl. “Don’t worry about being shot. The shooter used a tranquilizer.”

“Sam, I’m sure happy to find you,” blurted Tegan, pushing hair from her face.

“I hope you brought reinforcements in the way of the entire Victorian police force.”

“Yes and no.”

“Please tell me your father knows exactly where you are.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“The only time I ever needed a cop and I can’t find one. Just my luck,” spat Sam.

“Where’s Detective Kendal right now?”

“Riddles Creek looking for me,” Tegan admitted.

“Great. It’s a shame he’s looking in the wrong place. Do you have any idea where we are?”

“We’re at the Portsea beach.”

“That’s over an hour from Melbourne and two hours from Riddles Creek,” whispered Sam.

“Seeing how there’s nothing else to do, tell me how you were kidnapped? We’ll compare notes.”

“I sat on a seat closest to the train’s door, minding my own business when four boys started to harass me. Two boys made their way towards me and gallantly ushered me into the front of the train. I felt happy they stood up to the boys.”

“Let me guess the rest,” hissed Tegan interrupting. “The train stopped in a tunnel. You were ordered at gunpoint to enter a small room after you got off the train. A second train came along. You were ordered to board it. When the train stopped at the next station you were forced into a van. The train you were on headed back to Melbourne.”

“Wow, what a good guess.”

“At least I know what happened to you.”

Gradually Claire opened her eyes. Moaning she sat bolt upright staring at an overhead fan slowly rotating above their heads. Wide eyed she slid along the dirty metal floor, pushing her shoulders into the metal wall. Tegan noted she looked to be scared out of her mind. Claire closed her eyes. The moment she stared at the fan again she screamed. Lashing out she tried to punch the slow rotating metal fan blades. She lashed out at the fan blades time and again. Tegan ran over and held her in a bear hug.

“It’s okay. The knockout drug must have been stronger than mine. I went through something similar when I woke. I feel silly admitting it. I reckon it must have been the drug. Give her a few more minutes for the effect to wear off,” advised Sam.

“Drugged,” echoed Tegan. “What sort of drug?”

“I have no idea. All I know is it gives you hallucinations for a few minutes before it wears off enabling your senses to return to normal. I feel okay so I don’t think there are any lasting complications.”

Struggling to free herself from Tegan’s grip, Claire yelled. “The fan is falling. Move out of the way.” Raising her fists above her head, she tried to swipe the blades away yet again.

“Close your eyes for a while. It’ll be okay. Trust me the fan isn’t falling,” stated Tegan.

Claire closed her eyelids. When she finally re-opened them she’d come out of the drug-like trance. Sweat trickled down her hairline. Clawing her way to a standing position, she began to study the small dark room.

“What just happened?”

“Don’t be too embarrassed,” said Sam. “I’ve already mentioned to Tegan you were drugged. You’ll be fine. I promise I’ll keep your actions a secret. I’ll even promise to take it to my grave.”

“Thank you. If Alan Kendal ever got a wind of the scene, I’d never hear the end of it.”

Claire chuckled. She started to pace the container like a caged lion. Stopping at the door she kicked it a few times.

“Save your strength. I’ve tried everything to get out of here,” moaned Sam. “There’s no way out.”

“There’s always a way out,” corrected Claire. “You just haven’t thought of it yet.” She slowly walked about their semi-dark prison cell studying the walls. “I feel extremely embarrassed over my actions,” she hinted, standing directly under the fan.

“Don’t be,” replied Sam. “The only thing I care about is getting out of here. Have you discovered an escape route? I’m fresh out of ideas.”

“This is a shipping container. By the look of the structure I’d say un-escapable,” reported Claire.

“I don’t want to hear it,” growled Tegan. “There has to be a way out.”

“Sam, how long have you been here?” asked Claire.

“Exactly three nights. When the small hole in the roof where the fan has been mounted goes dark, I scratch a mark on the wall of the container.”

“Tegan, your father is going to explode over this,” spat Claire staring at the outside world through the fan.

“Good,” shrieked Sam. “If we can hang on long enough he might find us.”

“I hope it’s sooner than later,” added Tegan. “I hate this place already.”

“You and me both, kiddo,” quoted Claire.

“If we get rid of the fan what’s the chance of getting through the hole?” whispered Tegan.

“Not good. It looks too small. At this stage I don’t want to wreck our only supply of fresh air, besides, I don’t think we’re going to be here for long,” hinted Claire.

“What makes you so sure?” quizzed Sam.

“For one thing, there isn’t a lot of food or water. Sam, if you were kidnapped for ransom, your parents should’ve known long before Tegan and I were kidnapped.”

“So my parents don’t care I’m missing? I thought after I rang them explaining I did board the train they’d have at least phoned the cops over my disappearance the moment I didn’t show. It’s the reason I ran for the streets in the first place. They don’t care.”

“Hold it kiddo,” grumbled Claire. “Your father personally walked into Police Headquarters. He insisted in talking to Detective Kendal. He can be extremely persuasive. He stood his ground arguing his point with the Constable on the front desk. Believe me, when I tell you your father created a ruckus.”

“Your parents have been frantically searching for you,” added Tegan.

“So they do care?”

“Don’t sound so surprised. They love you very much,” advised Claire.

“Did they say they miss me?”

“They sure did. The last time we met your parents they admitted there’s no way they’d ever stop searching,” said Claire.

“I was actually on my way home to tell my parents what I thought of them and I never wanted to see them again. Being inside this shipping container for a while has given me plenty of time to think. I suppose I’d feel the same way if my daughter told me to rack off.”

“How do you feel about your decision now?”

“I’ve changed my mind. I want to go home so I can tell my parents I love them. Tegan, I want to go back to school. If you can keep a secret, I’m thinking about being a coppa.”

“Your secret is safe. I’ll never tell a soul.”

“Maybe we could join the police force at the same time?”

“I think it’s a wonderful idea,” chirped Tegan.

Sam slid down the wall of the shipping container, placed her head in her hands and began to sob.

“We’ll get you home,” advised Claire. “This is detective Kendal’s plan ‘C’.”

“If Sam was the intended target why isn’t there a ransom? Also, why us?” added Tegan.

“You’re asking exactly the right questions. This whole sequence of events has to be more than human slave trafficking. Somehow I think all logical ideas point to one thing,” hinted Claire.

“Which is?” quizzed Sam, wiping the tears from her eyes.

“Revenge.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

KENDAL CAUGHT up to the team of undercover cops guarding the train at Southern Cross station a few minutes out from the Melbourne CBD.

“Any sign of my daughter or Detective Ambroso?” asked Kendal.

“No,” replied one from the group. “We managed to arrive a few moments before the train pulled up at the platform. We positioned ourselves at various points along the length of the train. We studied the face of each commuter when they stepped off the train. In total, there were seventy-five people on board. Ambroso and Tegan weren’t among them.”

“Have you searched the train?”

“Not yet. We were waiting for you.”

The group led by Kendal stepped into the carriages as if they were one. They walked from one end to the other. Stepping from the train simultaneously they grouped. Each one reported not a single person was left on the train nor could they discover a single clue.

Kendal extracted his mobile phone from his pocket. In seconds a voice answered. “GP, the packages have vanished. They didn’t arrive in Melbourne.”

“I told you someday you might need plan ‘C.’”

“I have to admit you were right.”

“Let’s hope it’ll work out.”

“It will,” barked Kendal. “If Claire is alive, it’ll be fine. The disappearing act is part of the plan.”

“Did the train driver cough up any evidence?”

“No. These guys are good, extremely experienced. They made an unblemished escape. What about you?”

“Zippo at my end.”

“So far so good,” mentioned Kendal. “The kidnapping appears to be too perfect. It might be a clue.”

“Let’s hope the trail has a few flaws,” whispered GP.

Slipping the phone back into his pocket Kendal faced his team.

“Thanks for the help. I’ll need a report from each of you. Make sure everything you saw, including the time it happened, is written down. We’ll catch up later.”

When Kendal entered Police Headquarters the media cornered him. He glared at the group before sweeping them from his path.

“Kendal, my office,” yelled Captain Hughes. The cameras immediately fell on him. He too swept them to the side.

“Can it wait?”

“No, it can’t,” growled Hughes.

Kendal changed the direction he was walking and followed Hughes into the lift. The doors closed on the faces of the lunging media.

“What a lynch mob,” grumbled Kendal. “How did they find out? I ordered a media blackout on this whole operation.”

“You’ll discover the answer in a few minutes.”

Kendal gave Hughes a dirty look as he stepped into his office. A tall thin good looking woman stood, straightening her tight fitting skirt and blouse. Slender calves were being stretched from her wearing black three-inch heels. A small unopened black handbag sat on the desk parallel to the edge.

“Detective Kendal, thanks for coming. I knew we’d meet today at this precise time.”

Kendal wasn’t in the mood for a visitor.

“This woman is Myriad Jones. She’s here to help,” snorted Hughes.

The woman walked across the floor. She briefly allowed her piano fingers to touch the bottom hem of her grey skirt as she walked. Smiling, she outstretched her hand.

“Thank you for your help, Cap Hughes. Cap is a nickname the detectives have given you due to the fact your predecessor came from the army in which he’d been a Captain. The nickname clings to you like oil on paper.”

“What do you want to talk to me about?” asked Kendal, looking into the woman’s dark brown eyes.

Hughes’ voice boomed through the sudden uncomfortable silence. “Myriad is here to help you find Tegan. She claims to be a medium.”

“There’s no such thing,” growled Kendal.

“Detective, I don’t blame you for being a skeptic.”

“It’s not hard. I don’t have time for games.” Kendal marched towards the office door.

“Fire Games was the time you nearly lost your life.”

Kendal spun around, glaring at the woman.

"I'm only trying to convince you of my credibility," whined Myriad.

"Don't bother to even try."

"Listen to what she has to say. The woman might be able to help," stated Hughes.

"Clock is ticking. I have to follow the strong lead I've discovered."

"Your partner and daughter are both missing," interrupted Myriad.

"Okay, you have my attention," grumbled Kendal. "Let's see how good you really are. Tell me where they are."

"My craft doesn't work the way you think it should happen."

"Why not? Your psychic powers should work easily if you were an authentic medium."

Kendal took a moment to size the woman up. She looked to have a keen intellect. Her soft features and luring eyes made her out to be a great actor. "Can you speak to the dead or not?"

"Kendal, give the woman a chance," insisted Hughes.

"It's quite all right, Captain," said Myriad. "I'm used to people mocking me. For the record, I believe I can."

Kendal shook his head in disgust.

"I can tell you're not a believer."

"You don't have to claim to be a medium to understand the reason why," jeered Kendal. "I made myself perfectly clear the moment we met."

"All I need is a chance to prove my worth."

Using a flippant wave of his hand, Kendal discarded the woman's comment.

"Do you know the exact where-a-bouts of your daughter?"

"If I did I wouldn't be here in this office talking double-dutch to a woman who claims she's a medium."

"Please, Detective Kendal, open your mind to the possibility. In time I'll find her. You have been through a lot lately."

"Lady, don't jerk me around."

Hughes shot his hand in the air. "Kendal, give her at least one chance."

"Everything she has said so far could've been discovered by watching the evening news."

"Patrick was a professional arsonist," informed Myriad.

Staring at the woman, Kendal cleared his throat before glancing at Captain Hughes.

"Don't make me order you to give the woman a chance."

"Cap, she's a fake."

"Please, what harm is there in allowing me to prove if I'm correct or not?" asked Myriad.

Kendal opened his mouth to say something. Only a rush of air flowed over his lips. He inhaled before speaking. "I'll give you one chance. When you've used it I want you to get out of my face."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence."

"I'm waiting."

The woman walked around in tight circles. At the start of each new lap, she placed her hand on Kendal's shoulder and started to chant.

"The circus act is amusing," snarled Kendal.

“How can I concentrate when I’m drowning in such negative emotions?” questioned Myriad.

Hughes scrunched his nose, shrugged a shoulder and turned to face the window to hide a widening grin.

Lifting her hands, Myriad closed her eyes. “Not long ago, probably the last case you were on you talked to a ghost. His name was Max.”

“You could have read about the information in the newspaper,” jeered Kendal.

“Max is in this building. Now he’s standing outside the office.” Myriad walked over and opened the door. “Max, welcome, please come in.” She closed the door and faced the ghost. “Max has informed me you were shot recently. The sniper left his calling card, so to speak. It was a hollow bullet. Inside he left a note. It read; I was paid to miss.”

Kendal’s eyebrows shot upwards. “Ask Max where my daughter is?”

“Have you a clue where Detective Kendal’s daughter is?” asked Myriad, staring at the door.

Kendal was about to intervene by leaving the room when Myriad spoke.

“Max told me you have two daughters. Tani is the youngest. Tegan is the one missing. He also added you’re married to an Italian woman named Margaret. Your partner is missing too.”

“You’ve already stated the obvious. What’s her name?”

“Claire Ambroso is the name of your partner.”

“Are you sure you heard Max right? The last I knew of my partner, she decided to retire.”

“Max has gone, scared off before he could tell me if she did actually retire.”

“Okay, you can tag along. Maybe when you see Max again he’ll let you know where Tegan is.”

The woman groped for the desktop. “I’m going to call it a day. I’ll be at your house at seven in the morning. Talking to the other side is extremely exhausting.”

Kendal and Hughes watched the woman walk towards the door. She grinned at the two men before marching out of the room, closing the door behind her.

“How does she know where you live?” whispered Hughes.

“Max will tell her,” taunted Kendal.

“Do you believe she’s the genuine article now?”

“Max didn’t tell her a single letter of one word which came out of her mouth. In the last case, ‘Heart of a Spider,’ Max was a ghost, which is correct by the way. The part which amuses me the most is that he wasn’t scared off by any negative vibes coming from me.”

“Sorry, I got you into this mess. I’ll have the woman banned from entering the building or speaking to you.”

“It’s okay. Let the woman think she’s pegged me for a believer. Time will unveil whatever she’s up to.”

Kendal walked out of Hughes’ office. Inside the lift, he pressed the roof button. By the time he stepped out into the fresh air the sun appeared to be sinking low in the sky. He paced the roof, his hand clutching his mobile phone waiting for someone to answer his phone call.

“Kendal, I have some interesting news,” instructed the voice.

“GP, I want to hear good news.”

“For the first time in history the quarry I’ve been chasing has given me the slip,” whispered GP.

“It’s interesting indeed,” mumbled Kendal. “You’re right, plan ‘C’ came into play much earlier than I thought. Any idea in which direction the girls went?”

“They were bundled into a white van and driven towards Melbourne. My feelers are already out.”

“I’ll keep you in the know if I find out anything new.”

“I’ll do the same,” replied GP, ending the call.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WHEN CLAIRE heard banging on the front metal door she quietly walked to the front of the shipping container. She readied herself to pounce.

When the door opened a third of the way a smoke bomb was tossed inside. Sprinting towards the other end of the shipping container, Claire covered her eyes from the smoke. The overhead exhaust fan started to whine as the rotors automatically increased speed. In seconds the air inside the container returned to normal. The three hostages continued to cough. A tall figure stood in the doorway. Bright sunlight behind him made his features almost impossible to detect.

“What do you want from us?” coughed Sam.

Staring at the girls the figure entered the container. “I want you to do exactly what I tell you. There will be no more escape attempts. If you look above your heads at the four corners of the container you can vaguely see a small camera lens. I have been watching your every move on the monitor in the van for the past ten minutes.”

“Keep me, let the girls go,” barked Claire.

“What a hero.” The figure holding a handgun let go of a wintry day laugh. “You three, take your clothes off and put these on. You have three minutes.”

A pile of wetsuits and three large plastic bags were thrown into the middle of the container.

“Where are we going?” questioned Claire.

“Put the wetsuit on or else.”

“Or you’ll do what?”

The masked figure laughed. “I won’t have to do anything. You’ll drown. Put the wetsuits on. Place what you’re wearing in an airtight plastic bag. There is no need to fight, there are three bags. You have two minutes. If the three of you don’t exit the container in time the first one out will be shot.”

The masked figure stepped outside to take up a position on the sand dune overlooking the door. He checked his watch before lifting a sniper rifle. He looked relaxed staring through the gun sight.

The three girls donned a wetsuit. They made it outside in less than two minutes. Each stepped out into the sinking sun carrying a plastic bag full of their belongings.

“Good, let’s go,” snarled the hooded man. “Walk down the narrow sandy path in front of you towards the beach. If one of you strays from the path the girl behind you will forfeit her life. Don’t look to the right or to the left. Keep your eyes fixed on your feet. Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

“Where are we going?” asked Claire.

“I won’t ask my question again. If one of you hasn’t answered my question in five seconds one of you will be shot.”

The three girls blurted they understood what to do.

“Where are we going?” asked Tegan, lifting her head slightly.

“No talking in the ranks. What did I say about looking elsewhere except your feet?”

Tegan returned her stare to the ground. Claire led the way. The gunman couldn’t see she was studying the scrub taking in her surrounds.

“Ahead of you is a shallow swimming pool. Get in.”

“You forced me here to go for a swim in the pool?” groaned Claire. “My hair doesn’t need to be washed, I won’t go.”

“If you won’t get in the pool, it’ll be on your head.” The hooded man pointed his gun at Sam. “Which one do you want to see shot first, the blonde or the brunette?”

“No one.”

Claire climbed into the waste deep pool first. The others quickly followed.

“At the bottom of the pool, there is diving equipment. Pick up the weight belt. Clip it around your waist. Next, you’ll put on the diver’s tank and the mask. Insert the mouthpiece and start breathing. Take three small breaths then sit on the bottom of the pool breathing. Stay under water until I signal you to come up. If you fail in my instructions the pool water will turn red.”

When Claire broke surface, hooded man pointed his gun at Sam’s head. A crossbow and arrow were pointed in Tegan’s direction. The hooded figure spat through a locked jaw.

“Hurry up, get out of the pool. Join in single file behind the other two.”

Dressed in the wetsuit and diving equipment, Claire stared at the figure. She climbed out of the pool to join in the queue.

“You three have been my best behaved to date. Start walking. When we get to the beach you’ll see two small boats off to your right. Make your way to the closest boat and get in. Any funny business or fancy tricks, hell, if you breathe the wrong way you’ll have an arrow fired from my crossbow through your heart and a bullet to the brain. Understand?”

“Yep,” Sam jeered sarcastically.

“You’re more boring than a scratch in a repetitious song,” chided Claire.

“It’s the way I like it. No complications. The moment I see those new numbers in my bank account makes all of this sweeter than old wine.”

Claire stopped walking. She turned to face the kidnapper. "Never count your loose change too early, mate."

The kidnapper swore under his breath before pulling the trigger of his gun. The bullet embedded harmlessly into the sand at Claire's feet.

"Eyes front. There will be no more talk. Don't forget it's not your life you should be concerned about it's the one next in line. Now get moving. Pick up the bag of clothes belonging to you. Carry it like your life depends on it. I personally don't like the idea you have to stay in a wetsuit for too long."

"How long?" questioned Claire.

"Shut the hell up."

"How many girls have you treated this way?"

"I told you to shut up. Any more noise one of the other two will be buried in a sandy grave. If you want to test me, talk."

The group carried their parcel of clothes to the boat where they climbed in.

The masked figure jumped into the second boat. In seconds the outboard motor roared to life. The small boat which held the hostages was dragged behind at the end of a five-metre rope. The three girls needed to cling to the side to keep balance.

"I don't like this," whispered Sam, looking over the edge of the boat into the water. "Breathing at the bottom of a pool is one thing, making us dive into the cold depths of Port Phillip Bay I know I'm going to freak out."

"Stay cool, both of you. This is obviously a well-organized stunt. He won't want any of us to die. It'll spoil his budget," whispered Claire.

The boat slowly chugged out towards the middle of the narrow channel. Even though the breeze seemed to be picking up, the sea still looked calm. When they were in the middle of the bay the hooded figure killed the engine. Facing the prisoners he made a cunning chuckle.

"I'll say this only once if you forget a single word you'll have an unfortunate accident like the last girl."

"Where is she?" asked Claire.

"You'll see her real soon."

"I repeat my question."

The man glared. "Strapped to your back is a single air tank. If you take the air piece out of your mouth you will drown. Don't be foolish. If you see a shark, don't panic. Stay perfectly still. If you move the shark will pick up the vibrations. You'll be invited for dinner; his dinner. Understand? Nod if you do."

The three girls slowly nodded.

"If you try to get away, forget it, you'll drown or be eaten. You have enough oxygen for no more than half an hour. If you panic, move about or struggle your air supply will be depleted. If it happens you'll drown. In about ten minutes you'll be picked up. Any questions?"

"You don't have to do this," quipped Claire.

"Yes, I do."

"Why, what will you gain?"

"Lots of lovely money. This little operation nets me big bucks. I've stumbled a few times along the way causing some deaths. It's the way the money falls."

“Where are the so called accidents?” quizzed Tegan.

“They drowned.”

“How many?”

“A few. Take my advice. Stay alive. Hold your breath from time to time just in case there’s an unforeseeable delay.”

“A delay in what way?” snorted Claire.

“What’s it to you?”

“I feel responsible for the teenagers.”

“I can hear violins playing.”

“Let both girls swim to shore. I’ll do what you ask.”

Hoody chuckled. “The way I see it none of you have a choice. I want three pay packets, not one. Your request is denied. See the ship heading this way. It has just left the port of Melbourne. Its destination is on the other side of the world. When the cargo ship arrives the Captain will stop for exactly five minutes. It gives the harbour patrolman time to get off. Two divers will swim down to unshackle you. They will escort the three of you onto the ship.”

“What happens next?” asked Sam.

“In a week or two, you will be in another country. I’ll be counting my money. You will have a good life provided you do what you’re told.”

“If we don’t tow the line?” taunted Tegan.

“It’s up to whoever owns you. What he does after he has paid me is up to him. Live or die it’s not my problem.”

“So this little stunt is about human slave trading?” queried Claire.

“Exactly. Moving as one, chain your feet to the concrete block next to you. The diver from the ship has the only key. He’s been given explicit instructions if he thinks there’s a problem regarding his safety he will leave you to drown.”

“You’ll never get away with it,” spat Claire.

“Human slave trading is a thriving business. In a few years, I’ll be the richest man in Australia.”

“How much did you get for me?”

“None of your business.”

“What about the drowned girls?”

“Shut up. They cost me a fortune.”

“How much for me?” asked Claire again.

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yes. I’m curious. It’s in my nature.”

“100,000 big ones. Now get in the water or I’ll push you in.”

“I’m totally disgusted. I thought I’d be worth at least a million. Wait till I get my hands on the mongrel who only dished out such a meager amount.”

“Don’t be too upset over the amount,” jeered the kidnapper. “I’m happy.”

Claire bent down, shackled her chain as directed and picked up the twenty-kilo concrete block. The girls mirrored her actions.

Tegan and Sam slipped into the water. In seconds they were gone. Claire whipped around to face the man. Her grin quickly widened.

“Another country will wipe the smile from your face.”

“Don’t bet on it.”

Claire slipped into the water. The concrete block saw to it she sped to the bottom. She looked up to watch the light dimming. She also saw the two small boats leaving. Focusing on where they were going, Claire saw large air bubbles floating past her face mask.

A sink hole not more than five metres across by ten metres deep loomed out of the darkening void. Claire desperately tried to swim to the side of the hole. Her fingers groped for the top edge. The soft mud collapsed. Below, at the bottom of the hole, Tegan and Sam were waiting for her to arrive. They managed to shuffle sideways in the nick of time.

Tegan looked calm, quite the opposite to Sam. Her face showed she might be growing more agitated by the second. A two-metre shark searching for food swam over the hole. The three girls mimicked a statue. It swam on. Claire exhaled. Her air bubbles joined the endless line of bubbles rising to the surface.

Quickly unzipping her bag of clothes, she couldn’t conceal her confident grin.

Directly over the sink hole, the large cargo ship stopped. Claire worked quickly in the darkness extracting both her shoes. Discarding the bag of clothes she glued her gaze on the two girls. Tegan motioned for Sam to huddle in close when she realized the teenager wasn’t coping. Claire reached out to touch her on the shoulder. For a few seconds, they stared at each other through their face masks. Claire gave a sharp nod before recommencing her work. She peeled back the sole of both her runners, snatching out the small homemade knives.

Above the trio two shapes slipping into the water. They descended quickly. Claire hid the small knives, one in each palm. She patiently waited for the divers, signaling for Tegan and Sam to be ready. Watching the divers coming closer they nodded.

One wetsuited diver held a spear gun. He pointed it out in front. The shark which hovered above the sinkhole before disappearing changed direction. It again started circling.

Claire suddenly bent in two, waving at the divers. She tapped her air hose, looking to be in a panic. She pulled the air piece out of her mouth. One diver came over while the diver holding the spear gun held his distance. A spare air regulator was inserted into Claire’s mouth. She began to act relaxed. The diver unshackled the concrete block at her feet, signaling she should stay put. He turned his back and started to swim towards Sam. Claire lunged for the man. Using her small knife she slashed his air hose, managing to slash his arm and thigh before the man darted for the diver holding the spear gun. The retreating shark made a tight turn. It easily smelt blood and wanted an easy meal. Soon he’d be joined by other sharks.

It might be only a matter of time before the beast entered the sinkhole.

Claire grabbed the man’s weight belt in an attempt to hold him back. His eyes started to protrude behind his face mask. He signaled for the second diver to shoot. Making a beeline for the fight he lifted his spear gun to the correct angle. Claire watched him close the gap. The diver took careful aim. Claire managed to push the man she wrestled in front as the arrow bore through the water. It embedded in the male diver’s stomach. Claire yanked hard on the thin rope tethering the arrow to the spear gun. The spear gun flew towards her. She unshackled the first diver’s weight belt. For a few seconds, she watched the corpse start to ascend slowly out of the sink hole towards the surface.

The second diver swam upwards. Claire swam after him, replacing her air-piece back in her mouth. She dropped her weight belt for extra speed. Using her one remaining blade she cut his air hose and forced the man back down towards the bottom. The man lashed out using a tight-fisted punch. Claire groaned, exhaling a small amount of air. The last remaining diver pushed her away, but not before Claire managed to unclip his weight belt. He ascended towards the surface like a cork exploding from a champagne bottle. Trying not to disturb the water anymore, Claire descended back into the sink hole. Closing in on the girls, Tegan pointed to the small silver key half buried in the silt not far from her feet. In seconds Claire scooped it up in a cloud of silt. She swam over and started unlocking the two girls from their concrete blocks. Ascending towards the top of the sinkhole, they kept an eye out for the shark. They stayed at the edge of the abyss for a good minute scouring the ocean in every direction.

The group spied one girl who'd drowned not far from the rim of the hole. Claire signaled for Tegan and Sam to stay hidden. She swam over to the gruesome scene to investigate. The dead girl's tank happened to be full and she was still tethered to the concrete block.

Unclipping the weight belt from the dead girl, Claire clipped it around her waist, deciding against wasting too much time in her exploration. Collecting the girls they hugged the bottom of the bay on their way back to the beach.

The group swam underwater for nearly twenty minutes. Claire signaled a halt to their trip so she could check the air tanks of the two girls. They were both nearly empty. She pointed to the surface. For nearly a minute they hovered about five metres below the surface. Looking at the sea bed they noticed they were over a weed bed. The trio watched a few small sharks swimming along the bottom searching for whitebait or possibly a crab or two. A large stingray, her babies in tow floated under their feet. A school of bait fish split so they could go around the group. Sam signaled her air supply had finished. Claire unbuckled her weight belt. Tegan and Sam did the same. The three girls watched the black belts drop to the sandy bottom. The act caused them to ascend quickly.

The trio broke surface at the same time.

"Drop your air tank," advised Claire. "We have to keep moving."

"Why did you stop the ascent?" asked Sam. "I almost blacked out from the lack of oxygen."

"A precaution in case one of us suffered a mild case of the bends. We didn't have enough air left in any one of the tanks to dive again. It's best to be safe than sorry."

"My brother was right when he said we should go back to school," mentioned Sam.

"Smart kid," hinted Tegan.

"Come on, the shore isn't too far. Hopefully, we'll make it back to terra firma before nightfall."

"I hope the shark doesn't follow us for dessert," whispered Tegan. "I don't feel like being his after-dinner snack."

"We should be okay. Just in case a shark decides to investigate our swimming vibration we'll clear the area. If we avoid splashing too much the shark won't even know we're missing," advised Claire.

The swimmers were only one hundred metres from the beach when they were suddenly caught in the infamous Port Phillip Bay rip. The current felt too strong to swim against. In seconds they were being pushed parallel to the beach at the rate of twelve knots.

“Everyone, roll onto your back,” called Claire. “There’s no way we can fight the rip, we’ll have to ride it out.”

The girls turned face up and started to kick their way towards the beach while moving sideways.

“Claire, any idea how long we’ve been in the water? I’m exhausted,” called Sam.

“About forty-five minutes at a guess.”

“Do you think we’re getting any closer to land?” asked Tegan.

“Stay positive. I’ll turn over on my stomach to take a look.”

Claire studied the area closely. The heads into Port Phillip Bay were looming. Bass Strait lay beyond. If they didn’t make it to land in the next few minutes they’d have to fight the three-metre swells bearing down on them.

“Girls, an outcrop about the size of a small car is in easy reach. We have to grab hold of it. There is no second chance.”

The girls swam against the current; exhaustion evident on their faces. The rocky outcrop scraped Claire’s right hand. She groped for the jagged rock. Her grip held. Grabbing hold of Tegan, she pulled her in close. Making positive she’d gripped the rock firmly, Claire just managed to grab Sam before she disappeared under the water. In a mighty effort, she pushed her against the rocky outcrop. The three girls clung to rock wall knowing their life depended on it.

“Climb,” whispered Claire. “Take your time. Make sure every move you make is a firm one.”

It took the trio five minutes of exhaustive climbing before they could sit on a small patch of wild sea grass watching the waves increase in size as they pounded their way into the bay through the heads. A couple of kilometers from the heads the cargo ship they were destined to be on ploughed through the waves, leaving the bay in its wake.

“That was a close call,” Tegan managed to whisper.

Claire nodded. “We’ll sit here for a few minutes before making our way inland.”

Watching the sun fading fast, Tegan lunged forward to a standing position. “I think we should make a move.”

Claire brought her body to a vertical position. “Yes, I agree.”

“Can’t we stay sitting? I’m exhausted,” moaned Sam.

“Time to move,” advised Claire, yanking the girl to her feet. “Besides, when the kidnapper discovers we weren’t picked up or drowned, he’ll come looking.”

“I get the message,” said Sam with a sigh.

“If everyone keeps quiet and a sharp look out we’ll avoid capture. We mustn’t be seen again,” whispered Claire.

“Why can’t we flag down the first car we see or knock on the first house we come across?” asked Sam, starting to drag her feet.

“We don’t know what the kidnapper looks like. We might be flagging him down,” warned Tegan.

“You do sound exactly like your father,” chuckled Claire. “Don’t forget one important issue. We don’t know how many cohorts the kidnapper has working for him.”

“I didn’t think of that,” said Tegan. “From this moment on the fact is now embedded in my memory.”

Still shaking her head Claire led the way into the bush.

The group stumbled onto a narrow sandy trail. They followed it as it weaved through the scrub. By the time they stumbled onto a clearing the sun had gone. The trio ducked behind a fallen log.

“There’s definitely a smell of rain in the air,” mentioned Sam.

Claire whispered instructions. “You two stay put; I’ll go check out the clearing. Maybe there are campers around the place.”

“This clearing looks familiar,” admitted Tegan.

“It sure does,” whispered Claire. “Too familiar.”

Tegan and Sam watched Claire from behind the large fallen log. Keeping camouflaged, she snuck right up to the side of a metal shipping container. Its sides were rusted. A fan slowly rotated in the top.

The girls doubled their guard duty efforts the moment Claire disappeared around to the front of the shipping container. Discovering a locked padlock she moved her gaze to a small gap at the side of the door where it had received a small amount of damage.

“Is anyone inside?” called Claire. Waiting for a response, she studied the scrub. Hearing a slight noise she squatted behind a large thick bush close to the front of the container.

From inside the container, the noise came again.

Checking the area again, Claire quietly stepped over to the container. She called again. “Is anyone inside?”

“Is someone there?” asked a scared voice.

“Whatever you do don’t scream. I’m Detective Claire Ambroso. I’ll attempt to rescue you.”

“Thank you, thank you.” The voice sounded excited beyond belief.

“The front door is padlocked. I need you to make a material rope out of your clothes. It has to be long enough to get you to the top of the container.”

“Yes, I can do it,” wheezed the voice.

“Make it fast. I’ll explain later. We mightn’t have much time.”

Claire studied the area for the umpteenth time, walking back to Tegan and Sam. “There’s a girl in the container. My plan is to get her out through the hole in the roof where the fan is. Whistle if you see or hear anything. If the kidnapper arrives don’t hesitate to run like the wind. Whatever you do don’t look back. If we’re caught the best thing to do is split up. Hopefully, there will be only one person. At least one of you needs to escape. Use the first phone you see to call triple zero.”

Claire didn’t wait for a reply. On her way back to the metal shipping container she grabbed a pair of sturdy wooden logs about a metre long. She leaned both logs against the wall of the container at a forty-five degree angle and climbed like a monkey. Gripping the top edge of the container she launched herself onto the roof. The birds-eye view of the surrounding bush looked perfect. Claire signaled to Tegan and Sam the way out of the area.

Reaching down, Claire pulled up one of the logs. She walked over to the fan. Lifting the log she drove it downwards using every ounce of her strength. Sparks erupted from the fan. Claire repeated the performance. The fan made a metallic groan before falling into the container. A young girl's face appeared directly under the hole. She'd been sobbing. Her tears left dirty streaks down her cheeks.

"Throw up the material rope," whispered Claire.

The material rope erupted through the hole. Claire caught the end before it started to fall back.

"Hold on real tight. Get ready to clutch the top of the roof."

The girl nodded and curled her fingers tight around the end.

In a clean and jerk stance, Claire readied herself. She inhaled as she stood, heaving the girl off the dirty floor towards the top of the container. Five dirty fingers grabbed hold of the metal edge followed by another five. Claire stooped, grabbed hold of the girl's wrists, repeating her clean and jerk routine.

The girl came pouring through the hole. For a couple of seconds, both stared at each other.

"Are you hurt?" whispered Claire.

"No, only scared half out of my mind. If I stayed in there too much longer I think I'd go insane. How did you find me?"

"I'd love to say it was on a tip off, but it happened by sheer coincidence."

"Thank you so much for finding me. How can I ever repay you?"

"Easy, jump."

Hearing a low sharp whistle, Claire stared at Tegan through bug eyes. "Jump, jump," she whispered.

Landing on the sand, they sprinted after Tegan and Sam.

"Don't stop for nothing," whispered Claire bringing up the rear. "Nobody fall over."

Ten minutes of running, Sam, leading the foursome slowed to a walk. "I can't go any further," she puffed.

"We'll hide behind the large tree directly in front so we can take a break," advised Claire.

She kept a silent vigil while the girls closed their eyes. Soon Claire too succumbed to fatigue and closed her eyes.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

KENDAL'S GRANDFATHER clock in the hall struck 7:00am. He'd been pacing the floor a good fifteen minutes waiting for the doorbell to ring. The moment he heard footsteps approaching he opened the door, closing it behind him.

"Not even an invite for coffee?" asked Myriad.

"My wife's asleep. I don't want to wake her. Is there any more news from Max?"

“Yes. He stood at the foot of my bed at midnight. He told me something I don’t understand.”

“Like what?”

“He informed me a man wearing a wide brimmed hat has been talking to you on a regular basis.”

“Do you know his name?”

“No, Max didn’t say. So you do know this man?”

“Know of him, yes.”

“So you have to admit I’m one hundred percent correct in my medium knowledge.”

“I’ll keep my judgments to myself for now,” stated Kendal, still looking skeptical.

The woman grinned behind Kendal’s back as he led the way to the car.

Kendal drove past a man in a wide-brimmed hat. He signaled coffee at the closest café. Kendal held up four fingers. He parked the car outside the main door leading into the police complex and escorted Myriad up the stairs.

“Meet me in the tea room. I’ll be half an hour,” ordered Kendal.

The small café on the closest corner looked no bigger than a shoe box. Graffiti completely covered every external brick. Even though the place looked like you should never buy a coffee at the place, its reputation for serving the best cappuccino in Melbourne couldn’t be matched.

Kendal spied GP sitting at the table in the back. On the table were two paper mugs. He stood when Kendal walked in.

“Are you up for a walk?”

Kendal swiped the mug from the tabletop before following the man out of the cafe.

They walked in the opposite direction of the main road. GP deliberately picked the narrow lane closest to the cafe, reason being, it appeared to be deserted. At the halfway point GP stopped. Keeping his head bent he faced Kendal.

“I’ve some important news,” he said, lifting his coffee cup to hide his face.

“Aren’t you taunting death being out in the open? Have you forgotten there’s a contract out on you?”

“I’ve been extra careful. It’s why I picked this lane.”

“What’s the news?”

“Claire and Tegan were definitely kidnapped from the train. Two stations before the tunnel on the Melbourne side, everything happened quickly. The kidnappers left no trace. It was a real slick operation.”

“In your research did you uncover a motive?” quizzed Kendal, sipping his coffee.

“Human slave trading is my best guess.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve heard whispers in places you cops never want to go.”

“You should’ve called me earlier.”

“Not possible. I believe my phone calls are being monitored.”

“Can I do anything to help?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll find the person responsible. The problem will be swept away. I don’t like it when I feel trapped,” confessed GP.

“Have you dug up any information on Sam?”

“Still nothing.”

“In a wild guess do you think Claire and Tegan are still in the area?”

“I’ve no way of knowing. If I were to guess, I’d say yes. For how long, I don’t know. Usually, you have a window of a few days before they’re never seen or heard from again.”

“Comforting news,” jeered Kendal sarcastically.

“You asked.”

“Why Claire and Tegan?”

GP shrugged. “Why weren’t you killed when you were shot?”

“I still don’t know the answer.”

“Have no fear. Claire will find a way to get your daughter home.”

Kendal eyeballed the man in the wide-brimmed hat. “I have a hunch you’ve fallen in love with Detective Ambroso.”

“What circumstance helped you to think up the preposterous idea?”

“The quick meaningful visit you gave Claire at the hospital.”

“What title did you give the case?”

“Heart of a spider.”

“For the record, I’m only concerned for Claire’s well-being.”

“Are you positive that’s all?”

GP distributed his weight evenly over both his feet, squaring himself to Kendal. “A thug from the underworld in love with a cop can never be.”

“Are you sure?”

GP started walking down the lane. “Detective you might want to keep up. If I’m a marked man, I have to keep moving. When the problem is solved I’ll be able to reflect on what life has to offer.”

“I’ll run this idea past your clever brain to see what your answer might be,” puffed Kendal power walking after the man.

“Excuse the saying; shoot.”

“There are four numbers somewhere in the pictures the missing girls painted. The paintings have the same numbers. Any ideas you have will be a great help.”

“I’ll sleep on it.”

“GP you’re one complicated individual.” Kendal turned, scoffed the remainder of his cooled coffee and walked out of the lane.

The next morning Kendal woke to the ticking of the one-hundred-year-old Grandfather clock in the hall of his two-storey home. He stared at the ceiling listening. What woke him? He couldn’t be sure if the noise came from the floorboard at the bottom of the stairs. He checked the time on the clock sitting on the bedside chest of draws.

‘2:55am.’

Kendal sat bolt upright in bed and ran his stubby fingers through his black hair. Listening, he heard the fridge door close. He decided to investigate. Kendal slid his police issue Smith and Wesson from his shoulder holster before walking towards the door. Glancing back at Marg, his eyes momentarily glazed when he saw her sleeping peacefully.

Stepping into the hallway all seemed quiet inside the home.

If Tani or his mother-in-law raided the fridge he knew they'd have made more noise. Besides, the squeaking of the floorboard always woke him. No matter how much he complained about it every person in his family always trod on the board. He jeered at his mother-in-law who seemed to delight in stepping on the exact spot several times in rapid succession. His rational thinking came to one conclusion; someone else must be in the house.

Kendal slowly descended the stairs. On the second bottom step, he stopped, pushed his back against the wall and studied the lounge room before moving sideways along the wall towards the study. He hesitated at the room's threshold when he witnessed a small round light hovered a metre off the floor. The silhouette of a man sat in his chair at the study desk, smoking.

"Good, you're awake," whispered the man.

Kendal pointed his gun at the floor before stepping into the room. "There's no smoking in the house."

"Sorry." The figure crushed the cigar out, placing it into his pocket.

"Thanks, GP. How did you obtain entry into my house?"

"The same way you do when you don't have a key. Little Mike showed you how to open doors by using two narrow steel clips. I showed Mike."

"Don't you ever sleep?" questioned Kendal, sliding his gun onto the shelf next to the dusty unopened whisky bottle.

"I'm not dictated by the clock. I sleep when I say. I've a couple of new pieces of information to add to our last conversation."

"I'm listening."

"I've uncovered details two contracts were actually in my head. One has been extinguished."

"Where did the murder take place?"

"You, cops are slow. By now the corpse will smell like off meat. I'm surprised somebody hasn't called it in."

"Have you come here to gloat?"

"No. You've been set up."

"Set up in what way?"

"Have you heard the term, snow-dropping?"

"Yes. The term is used when someone has stolen lady's underwear."

"Check your fridge. You might want to talk to a lawyer. By the way, I didn't do it."

"I believe you. Who did?"

"The intruder wore a black balaclava which matched his attire. I lost sight of the bloke in the dark. I'll say this; the intruder was very quiet."

"You didn't say where the murder took place."

"The victim fell from the top floor of the Rialto building. I think I dislocated my knuckle on his head. The fight lasted a while. He appeared to be extremely professional." GP walked to the window. "Kendal, I must be getting old, I nearly lost the fight. I have to leave. The cops are on their way."

"How long before they arrive?"

The answer didn't come. GP slipped out of the window, allowing the darkness to swallow him.

Blue and red flashing lights entered the court, stopping outside Kendal's house. Ten men in police uniforms surrounded the house in less than a minute. Kendal didn't hesitate. He sprinted for the front door, flung it open to stare at a Constable preparing to kick down the door.

"Don't you dare kick my door in," yelled Kendal.

"Sir, place your hands on your head." The Constable raised his gun to chest height. He clutched shiny new handcuffs in his free hand.

"I don't suppose you'll be nice enough to put away those handcuffs? I can walk to the car on my own."

"Sorry, no can do."

Kendal placed his hands behind his back, allowing the over excited Constable to finish his arrest.

"Do you know what you're doing?" asked Kendal.

"I have my orders."

Kendal received a shove in the shoulders which forced him into the lounge. "Sit in the chair. I'll advise you not to say a word," snarled the Constable in charge.

Spying his wife, mother-in-law and Tani watching the proceedings from the top of the stairs, Kendal grumbled.

"Before you get too cocky put the gun away. My family is looking at you. I don't want to see them accidentally shot."

The Constable spoke into his two-way radio. He waited for ten cops to invade the house before sliding his gun back into its holster.

"Search the house."

"What are you looking for?" questioned Kendal, his voice sounding ice cold.

"Shut the hell up."

"I won't have you speak foul language in my house. On whose orders are you following?"

"It's none of your business."

For a few seconds, Marg vanished. When she returned she held Kendal's mobile phone and started walking down the stairs. She stopped halfway, glaring at the intruders.

"What are you searching for?" she growled.

The Constable pointed his finger at her. Each word he yelled he appeared to be growing more agitated.

"Woman, get your arse down here."

Marg started to back step away from the ruckus.

"Hold it right where you are, lady."

"Al what in the world is going on?"

"I've no idea. Come down to keep the peace. The Constable might shoot."

The old woman and Tani joined Marg at the bottom of the stairs.

"What is the idea waking me from a great dream," croaked the old woman.

“Join in on the party. I want you to sit on the settee next to the so-called Detective Kendal.

“Sonny, I will not have you talk to me in a hostile voice. The only way I’m moving from these stairs is when you apologize.”

Kendal’s eyebrows shot upwards. He chuckled as he spoke.

“Don’t go up against the old dear. I’ve seen her get real angry. Be warned she has a hard right hook.”

The Constable’s face turned anger red. “Please, come down,” he asked through gritted teeth.

“Much nicer,” confessed the old woman.

She walked across the room to sit next to Kendal.

Ten cops ran up the stairs, entering the main bedroom. Kendal watched the proceedings, intrigued.

“I’ve found what we came here for, boys.” The Constable came charging down the stairs, hovering over Kendal like he’d won a trophy. “What do you say to all these?” He gave a fox like grin, throwing forty to fifty pairs of ladies underwear at Kendal.

“They’re not mine. By the way, don’t miss the ones in the fridge.”

Marg frowned. “Those undergarments don’t belong in this house. I should know I do the washing”

“Snow-dropping is an offence. Kendal, I’m shocked at knowing your secret. Your wife should throw you out amongst the garbage.”

Kendal’s mother-in-law walked over to the young Constable.

“You’re in serious trouble now,” Kendal chuckled choking on his words.

“Shut your mouth.”

“Young man,” croaked the old woman. “I mightn’t like my son-in-law, however, if I hear one more obscene word coming from your mouth I will personally ram both my fists down your throat. Do I make myself clear?”

To shove her words home she lifted her white knuckled fist, slamming it hard against his chin. The Constable went down, falling over the coffee table. Staggering to his feet he pointed the gun at her.

“Sit down. I’m arresting you for assaulting a police officer.”

“I won’t sit down. If you or anyone comes close to me they’ll suffer the same fate.”

Shaking her head, Marg whispered. “Mum, come sit next to me. The Constable is only doing his job.”

“I can assure you I’m the wrong person,” jeered Kendal.

Marg stared at the pile of woman’s underwear shaking her head.

“I can tell these don’t belong to your wife or the old dear or your kids,” growled the Constable rubbing his jaw. “There must be at least one-hundred pairs of woman’s knickers in the pile. A thorough search of the house might reveal more. Do you want to change your plea?”

“No,” answered Kendal. “What’s more, I think your estimation might be a little off. I’ve counted the many different styles. I believe there’s only about fifty.”

“Keep digging a hole you scum bag. I hope you know a good lawyer?”

“I’ve a question,” quizzed Kendal.

“What?” the Constable blurted

“Except for the fridge, how did you know where to look?”

“I received a tipped off.”

“From whom?”

“I’m not revealing my source.”

“Did the informant come from a male or female?”

“Take this clown detective away. Book him on stealing woman’s knickers from clothes lines. By sun up, I’ll think of some more accusations. Where’s your car keys to the unmarked cop car? I’ll personally drive it back to Police Headquarters. You won’t be using it for a long time, if at all. The forensic boys are going to have a great time combing evidence from the car.”

When Kendal’s mobile phone began to shrill, Marg lifted it to her ear.

“Hello,” said a man’s voice.

Marg turned on the loudspeaker and held it out in front of her.

“Hello, to you too,” replied Kendal.

“I apologize for waking you at this hour.”

“Sir, it is fine. I was awake due to the fact I have visitors. I’m Detective Alan Kendal. Who told you my phone number?”

In the short silence, Kendal heard a door creaking open. A woman’s calm voice came through the line.

“Hey, Sugar, how goes?”

“Claire it’s about time you called. Where have you been hiding?”

“I’m fine and so is Tegan.”

Kendal sighed in relief. “Good news. I repeat my earlier question.”

“I thought a swim might be good, but we all nearly drowned. You’ll never guess who Tegan and I found.”

“I think I can guess. However, I don’t want to spoil the suspense.”

“We found Sam and her friend Bernice.”

“Well done. Is there any news on the missing girl, Simone Grafton or any others?”

“Simone drowned long before we arrived,” reported Claire.

“Stay put, I’ll have Marg pick you up. I’ll see you in the morning. If you think I’m late try the holding cells at Police Headquarters. I believe I’m going to be busy for a while.”

“Did I miss a party again?”

Before Kendal could reply his phone was confiscated and tossed into the other room by the overly eager Constable.

“Walk to the car. We’re going for a ride.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MARG STEERED her car past the lazy curves which fringed the long drive. She parked outside the front door of a house built in the middle of the bush. The head lights of the car shone on the front door. She checked her watch. It read fifteen minutes after five in the morning. A possum, startled by Marg's intrusion, darted along the phone wire heading to the house as she stepped down from her car. In the east, the sky looked to be lightening. The birds started chirping to greet the new day. Claire opened the door of the house before Marg got to the verandah steps. Tegan stepped outside followed by Sam and Bernice.

"It's good to see you four are okay. I've been so worried."

"Marg, we were never in grave danger," commented Claire.

Marg hugged each of the group in turn. Looking at Claire she said. "I'm surprised you found this house. I got lost twice."

"It happened to be a lucky coincidence," replied Claire, facing the elderly couple. She reached out to shake their hands. "Thank you for your generous hospitality. It's not every day you get so much excitement."

"You're welcome in our house anytime," commented Mark the elderly gentleman.

Claire waved goodbye and slipped onto the front passenger seat of the car. "Marg where's Al? He's not sulking somewhere is he?"

"There's a problem."

"The last time we spoke he informed me if he's not around, look for him in the police lock up."

Marg glanced sideways at her best friend while she drove back up the drive. "I believe he's been framed for stealing ladies underwear?"

"By the worried expression on your face, I'd say this is no joke. He's been framed alright. Marg we have to get to Police Headquarters."

By the time Marg pulled into a parking bay at Police Headquarters the building seemed abuzz. News of Kendal's arrest spread like a wildfire. All eyes were on the man wearing the long black coat being escorted to interview room one.

"Come on," hinted Claire after hearing the news from the front desk. "Marg, I'm sure Al will be home inside an hour."

The moment Kendal was freed from the handcuffs he settled himself into a chair, staring at the Constable sitting at the table opposite him.

"How old are you?" he asked, leaning further back in the chair.

"I'll ask the questions here," growled the Constable.

"What rank are you?"

"Senior."

Kendal moved to stand.

"Sit."

Kendal ignored the taunt.

"Don't make me pull my gun on you."

Kendal looked over his shoulder when the door opened.

"What's all the here-say?"

"Senior Sergeant Hughes, Sir," blurted the Constable, standing at attention. "I have it on good authority this detective has been snow-dropping."

Hughes stepped into the room, glaring at the Constable. "You're joking. Spare me the grief. Kendal, get your arse to my office right now." Walking out of the room he led the way to the lift. He stood waiting for his shadow to catch up.

"What's she doing here?" asked Kendal, glaring at the woman standing at the lift door. He didn't give her a second glance before stepping into the lift car.

"Myriad dreamt you might be in trouble."

"I'm pleased to announce I'm correct, yet again. Have I proven enough times for you to believe I'm better than I say?"

"I have my doubts over your statement," snarled Kendal.

"How many more times do I have to prove I'm reliable?"

"Too many to count."

The trio walked to Hughes' office door. Before Kendal entered the room he said abruptly. "Cap, did you know the word Myriad means ten thousand."

"I don't care what it means. Step into my office. Don't forget to shut the door."

"I want her out of the office," bellowed Kendal.

"Myriad, could you please wait outside for ten minutes?" asked Hughes.

"Sure." Winking at Kendal, she walked out of the office, closing the door in her wake.

"What's on your mind, Kendal?"

"Cap, I think you may have guessed already what I'm about to whine about."

"Yes, I know. I reckon you're about to tell me anyway."

"This preposterous accusation I've been stealing ladies knickers from clothes lines is totally wrong."

"I know, however, the informant sounded adamant. In your defense, I told him I'm positive the accusation is false. Downstairs ignored my request to bury what he said."

"Do you know the identity of the informant?"

"The only thing I know is the informant happened to be a bloke."

"Cap, you can't take this arrest on its merit."

"I agree. Something is wrong. I want you to find out what it is. By the way, I finally got through to the correct person. The charges are being dropped."

"Good. There's one more thing. Cap, Myriad is a weird person. She holds too many secrets."

"All self-confessed mediums are nutty; a dollar short of a cent."

"I'm serious."

"So am I," stated Hughes.

"Are you?"

"Yes. Don't forget to pick up your weapons at the front desk. Before you leave, whatever you do please don't go hit the young Constable who arrested you."

Kendal walked to the door. Facing the Captain he said. "I've an idea. Let's play along with all this for the time being. Let's throw it all into the pot and have a stir. Let's see what comes up cooking."

"I'll play along," agreed Hughes. "You're right, it might get interesting."

Kendal walked past Myriad on his way to his desk. She shadowed him like a sheep following the smell of food.

“Is there any chance you could take me home?” Myriad asked.

Kendal glared at the woman before faking a smile. “Yes.”

“Thank you.” Myriad looked cheerful walking out of Police Headquarters.

“What of the snow dropping charges?” she asked, striking up a conversation.

“Don’t you know?” quizzed Kendal.

“Not yet.”

“I find myself asking why you consistently drag your feet at knowing what’s going on.”

“When I’m tired my medium senses don’t work at their full potential.”

“I have a sneaky feeling you knew I’d offer you a lift.”

The woman looked up at Kendal. “Yes, I knew. Even though I feel drained I still can sense things.”

“I guess you know where my car is?”

“You’re right on the money. It’s the electric blue four-door job over by the wall.”

Kendal opened the car door, slipping onto the seat. A ten-minute drive saw him parked outside a small house. He noted the front garden looked well maintained.

“Quaint home,” he scoffed.

“Mere humble lodgings,” replied Myriad. “Care for a cup of coffee?”

“Sounds good to me.”

They walked to the front door. Myriad entered the house first. Kendal closed the door and started to look around the room.

“Make yourself at home. I’ll boil the kettle.”

“You haven’t asked me how I drink my coffee.”

Myriad looked over her shoulder at him. “White, no sugar. I didn’t ask due to the fact I knew the answer.”

Kendal walked about the room. He conjured up in his mind the spinning game Tegan loved to play. Turn around three times, observing anything and everything so you can escape a bad situation. Glancing at the door, he decided to play the game. He’d almost finished the third spin when Myriad walked into the room.

“Are you okay, detective?”

He flashed an embarrassed look. “I’m fine, thank you.”

“What were you doing?”

“I took the liberty to practice a dance move.”

“You don’t strike me as the type.”

“You never can know everything about a person.”

“I make sure I do,” Myriad confessed confidently.

Eager to change the subject, Kendal held out his hand for the coffee mug. “Who are the two people in the photo hanging from the wall next to the window?”

“My husband and eldest child went missing eight years ago. Their photo sat on the buffet. Yesterday I re-framed it. Last night I hung the photo on the wall.”

“You couldn’t use your powers to find them?”

“No. I’ve tried endless times. They must have a spell on them preventing me from knowing any information on their where-a-bouts.”

“Do you have any idea who might do such a thing?” asked Kendal, holding back a chuckle.

“None.”

“Did you report the incident to the police?”

“Yes, I did.”

“What was the outcome of the investigation?”

“I’d prefer not to talk about it,” hinted Myriad.

“There’s not much furniture in this room,” mentioned Kendal, swallowing a mouthful of his coffee.

“No there isn’t. I like to live an uncluttered life. The more things you have the more time one must spend dusting.”

Kendal swallowed the remaining brown brew and placed the mug on the coffee table. Walking towards the front door, he turned to face the woman, extending his hand. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

They shook hands in a business-like manner.

“Detective Kendal, I move house a lot so I travel light. I’m tired of unpacking boxes of inconsequential things. I’ll see you later today.”

“Have the day off. You look tired. Tomorrow will be soon enough.”

Myriad stood at the doorway watching Kendal walk to his car. She waited for him to speed off down the road before re-entering her house.

Kendal felt thankful he didn’t have to see Myriad for the rest of the day. There was something about the woman which rubbed him up the wrong way. He certainly didn’t trust her.

Parking in his driveway, Kendal sat staring at the front door totally oblivious to the car following him into the court.

“Why didn’t Myriad know about the spinning game? Why didn’t she know he lied?” he grumbled.

“No wonder you were shot,” chuckled Claire, pushing her head through the open car window. “Where’s my kiss hello? Why you’re at it what about one for making it back home, alive?”

Kendal stared at his partner. “It’s about time you turned up. Myriad is definitely a nut case. I was invited into her house to have a coffee. Right in the middle of the spinning game, she asked me what I’d been doing. I just can’t figure out how she knows how I drink my coffee and where I parked my car, yet didn’t know anything about the spinning game. Go figure.”

“The four of us are fine,” barked Claire. “You are one frustrating individual male. Girls let’s get into the house. Tegan, at least your mother was overjoyed at seeing you. Not like someone else I know.”

“Hold it,” yelled Kendal. “If Myriad is any good she should’ve informed me of your arrival.”

“Who are you talking about?” asked Claire.

“Our new blow in partner,” replied Kendal. “Myriad thinks she’s a medium.”

“I’m too tired for this,” jeered Claire. “Tell me about her in about five hours.”

“Where are you all going? Get back here. Group hug is up. I’m thrilled to the back teeth everyone is home safe.”

Claire jabbed her partner in the arm. "I know you're itching to spill the Goss on this medium woman, so start talking."

"I'll say after you inform me of where you were? Don't forget to explain how you escaped. Take my advice, lose the wetsuits, they look uncomfortable."

"You're all heart," snickered Claire.

Kendal raised his hands in surrender. "I'm only trying to help. Sam, here, you can use my mobile phone to call home. When you're done pass the phone to Bernice."

"Thank you, Sir. My parents will certainly be thrilled to hear from me."

"After you've talked to your parents, insist they not tell a soul. I don't want the kidnapper knowing of your escape till after he's been caught. You girls can stay here in my home. I'm positive in a few days we'll have an arrest," stated Kendal.

"I'll go make some breakfast," blurted Marg, smiling at Tegan and the girls.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DETECTIVE KENDAL, Myriad here, a small café has been robbed. The address is on the Nepean highway in Moorabbin, number 467. I'll meet you there. I sense the male robber is the same man who shot you."

Kendal staggered to his feet and dressed. Claire, hearing the shrill of the phone switched on the overhead light in her room, dressed before sprinting for the door. She met Kendal on the top stair.

"Al, it is 3:45 in the morning, who was on the phone?" whispered Marg. Walking up behind her husband she began to yawn.

"Myriad. She rang to inform me of a robbery."

"This Myriad woman is a nuisance," advised Claire.

Before Kendal sprinted down the stairs, Claire in hot pursuit, he focused on his wife. "Marg, hopefully, we won't be long."

Kendal drove his car towards the cafe, passing everything on the road. Pulling his mobile phone out of his pocket he dialed police dispatch. A cheerful female voice came through the line.

"Kendal here, has there been an armed robbery?"

"Yes Sir, I was just about to call you."

"In Moorrabin?"

"Sir, how did you know?"

"Never mind, Detective Claire Ambroso and I are on our way."

At exactly 4:00am they parked outside the small café squashed between two large office blocks.

Kendal studied a dull red car being parked on the other side of the road in front of a massive shopping complex. Through the haze settling over the area, he witnessed a well-

dressed woman step down from the car. He watched her straighten her short skirt; check the road for cars then marched towards them.

“Hello there, Detective Kendal and Claire Ambroso.”

“Claire, meet Ms. Myriad Sutcliff.”

“The medium lady,” snickered Claire.

“By the sarcasm in your voice, I can tell you don’t believe in what I do, Claire?”

“Detective Ambroso to you, and no I don’t believe.”

“Alan Kendal had been a non-believer at first. He’s changed his mind.”

Glancing sideways at her partner, Claire noted Kendal remained non-committal.

The woman extended her hand. Claire snubbed her off by folding her arms.

Kendal wasn’t in the mood. Above the noise of the people loitering out the front of the café, he heard crying coming from inside the shop. He quickly marched into the all-night café.

“I hope you didn’t mind my phoning?” questioned Myriad, trotting next to him.

“How did you know my number?” asked Kendal, sending her a poker face.

“Using my mind’s eye the numbers flashed into my brain. I’ve also seen the man who robbed this store. He’s not far from here. The man is sitting on a swing in the schoolyard. I thought you alone should apprehend him.”

“In which direction is the school?”

“It’s located over your left shoulder.”

“Stay here,” ordered Kendal.

He and Claire ran up the road. Inside a minute they found the school exactly how Myriad advised.

“Do you want to split up?” queried Claire, pulling her gun from an ankle strap.

“No, not yet. So far the woman has been dead right. If by chance she’s wrong about the sniper sitting on a swing we have to remain diligent.”

Claire and Kendal jumped the low wire fence bordering the school. There were several portable classrooms and the main building. From the safety of the garden, Kendal looked between the two rows of classrooms. At the far end, he spied the playground. He signaled for Claire to close in. Each new classroom they encountered they looked through a window. Only school work seemed evident. The bushes closest to the playground were thick enough to hide behind. Claire stood on one side under the eaves of the last portable classroom, Kendal stood on the other, hugging the wall. He studied the play equipment through the branches of a shrub.

The swing set looked abandoned.

Kendal focused on the surrounding area. The school oval appeared to be too large to hide anyone.

“No one’s about,” whispered Claire. “Not even a stray cat. I think we’ve been suckered. Surely you can’t believe her?”

Kendal looked Claire in the eyes. “It’s getting close to dawn; we’re in the middle of a schoolyard looking for a fictitious character who robbed a small 24-hour café. What do you think?”

“We’ve definitely been conned.”

Both detectives housed their guns. Walking back to the café they noticed the mist thickening, making visibility difficult. They searched each bush they saw while they retraced their steps.

Rounding the last corner, Kendal stared. Red and blue flashing lights resembled a pyrotechnic light show trying to penetrate the fog. At least twelve police cars successfully blocked the highway. The main road looked deserted. Kendal walked up to the closest table to the café door, grabbing the woman by the arm.

“Who are you really?” he spat.

“I told you I’m a medium,” instructed Myriad.

“You keep telling me the same thing,” he jeered.

“I don’t know what you want me to say?”

“I want you to start telling me what you’re up to?”

“I’m doing my part to help the police.”

“So you’re not on the payroll?” growled Kendal.

“Maybe after I crack my first case the police department will take me seriously. They might even start paying for my services.”

“In my opinion, you have yet to prove a thing.”

Kendal shook his head as a stocky Constable in a crisp blue police uniform handed him a written report filed by a Miss Leslie Carpenter. Kendal pushed Myriad back onto the seat. He began reading through Leslie’s version of the robbery. Before a minute ticked off he entered the café. The young woman he wanted to talk to sat quietly on a chair. Her hands were cradling her head. The young woman wore her hair short, cropped at the back. A diamond stud was embedded in each earlobe. He and Claire marched up to the table.

“Hi there, I’m Detective Kendal; this woman standing next to me is Detective Ambroso.”

The seated woman looked up. A worried expression etched across her forehead. “You forgot to introduce the other woman. The one standing three feet behind you.”

“The woman you are referring to is a blow in. Her name is Myriad.”

“Is she on work experience?”

“Sort of. May my partner and I sit?”

“Mr. Kendal, I have already told the whole story to every cop in this place. I’d prefer not to say another word. I have a headache.”

“Please, if you could enlighten me with any other details?”

“I’ll repeat what I just told you. I’ve mentioned to the police everything I know.”

Kendal could tell by the tone in her voice the young lady did not want to re-live the event of the robbery again. “I apologize,” he whispered. “I really need you to tell me.”

“Why?”

“I want to discover if there’s something you forgot to mention.”

“I’ve said everything at least three times.” The girl rolled her eyes before staring directly at the wall.

“Let me be the judge. I didn’t catch your name.”

“Leslie Swift.”

“See, there are gaps in your statement about the robbery already. You stated your name as Miss. Leslie Carpenter. Which name is correct?”

“My real name is Mrs. Leslie Swift.”

“Why give a false name?”

“I didn’t think it would be important.”

“I can assure you it is. Your statement will be brought up in court when we catch the thief.”

“You have a point,” groaned Leslie, slumping further into the chair. “I’m married. My husband doesn’t want me to work. He feels it’s his job to look after me. The money he makes isn’t enough to pay the bills or our baby’s needs. When he goes off to work I have my mother come to my house to look after my little girl. I have four short shifts a week in this all-night café. He doesn’t know. I spend my wages on the bills at random. Detective Kendal, if my husband thinks we’ll have a house soon and he thinks he’s done the work to get us a future, I can’t see the problem. I beg you to keep my name out of all this. If he ever finds out I work, he’ll be extremely upset.”

“I’ll keep the secret safe provided you tell me everything you know.”

“Thanks.”

“What time did the man enter the cafe?”

“Exactly three thirty this morning,” cut in Myriad.

“How could you know the time?” questioned Leslie, eyeballing the woman.

“Ignore her,” insisted Kendal. “It’s a long story which has a sour ending.”

Frowning, the girl refocused on Kendal “Just like the woman mentioned the robbery took place at exactly three thirty.”

“Are you sure? Maybe the robbery happened at three twenty-nine or three thirty-nine.”

“I’m positive.”

“Why are you so certain?”

“I remember looking at the clock on the wall thinking my shift finished in half an hour.”

“Was the man short, tall, skinny?”

“Tall and thin. When he left he matched the height of the yellow strip on the door.”

“Did he talk?”

“No.”

“He wore dark glasses,” reported Myriad.

“Yes, he did. Again how did you know?” questioned Leslie.

“My dear child, I’m a medium. I sense he might have been deaf.”

“Mr. Kendal is she for real?” quizzed Leslie scrunching her nose.

“I’m afraid so.”

“You don’t look the type to believe in such nonsense. The church I belong to preach, if you come into contact with such people pray for them and stay away.”

“Good advice.” Glaring at Myriad, Kendal added. “Please go for a walk outside.”

“Why should I leave? I have a right to be here. I’ll be able to help catch the robber. Did I say I’m always correct?”

“You’re unnerving the witness,” advised Kendal, abruptly. “If you don’t go outside I’ll be forced to arrest you.”

Myriad folded her arms. Pushing her nose into the air, she marched outside.

“Feisty old bag,” quipped Leslie.

“She is slightly hard to handle.”

“I appreciate the fact you sent her outside. Can I pray God gives you the strength to endure the presence of the woman?”

“Thanks for your concern, another time perhaps.”

“I suppose we have to get back to the questions.”

Kendal affirmed Leslie’s suspicions. Checking to make sure Myriad hadn’t snuck back into the café he refocused on the girl. “Did the man who robbed this place wear a mask?”

“No only sunglasses.”

“Did he have any distinguishing marks such as moles on his face, long hair, or an earring in his ear?”

The girl shrugged a shoulder.

Kendal looked up at Claire. “Can you buy three coffees?” he asked, slipping her ten dollars.

“I’ll make the drinks,” blurted Leslie, standing.

“We’ll take a five-minute break,” added Kendal. He walked outside, leaving Claire to settle Leslie’s nerves. He caught sight of Myriad talking into a tape recorder. She stopped the moment he approached. “We need to have a short conversation.”

“I know. I can tell you’re not happy.”

“It’s an understatement. I didn’t know you’re an author.”

“I’m a try hard. I want desperately to finish writing my first novel.”

“Did you mention this to Captain Hughes?”

“Not exactly.”

“Are you a true medium or not?”

“Yes. Detective Kendal, if it weren’t for me the male offender could have slipped through the net.”

“Is that writer’s talk?”

“You can mock me. I know what I know.”

“I’m not sure whether you understand or not. The offender did slip through the net.”

“You should’ve been here sooner.”

“Now I know your secret, I won’t tell anyone. Be warned, stay out of my way.”

Myriad placed her hands on her hips, watching Kendal walk back into the café.

Claire raised her hand to signal they were sitting at the table in the back corner. Kendal settled himself opposite Leslie.

“You were gone so long I nearly drank your coffee,” whispered Claire.

Kendal sent her a stale look.

“Now Mrs. Swift, I’d like to finish up so you can get ready to go home.”

“Thanks, it’s been a trying shift.”

“Did the man who robbed the café have any distinguishing marks?”

“You’ve asked that question.”

“I thought after a short break you might be able to remember something more than sunglasses.”

“He was bald. A tattoo had been inked on the top of his head.”

“I’ve read your statement. You didn’t mention this fact. Why not?”

“I didn’t think anything over its importance.”

“What was the tattoo a picture of?” asked Kendal on a sigh.

“I’m not sure.”

“Can you describe it?”

“No, I can’t.”

“Or won’t,” blurted Claire. “The way this story is panning out, it’s starting to smell. Maybe this male person just happens to be a boyfriend on the side?”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Have another crack at it?” urged Kendal. “It will strengthen your alibi.”

“I can’t describe what the tattoo looked like,” insisted Leslie.

“It was a tongue,” stated Myriad.

Kendal stared at the woman’s intrusion. In a heartbeat, he decided to remain silent over her sudden appearance.

“You weren’t here so how could you see it on his head?” spat Leslie.

“In my mind’s eye, I saw him accidentally drop the bag of money when he left the café. I saw him bend down to pick it up.”

Looking around the café Kendal spied a security camera. “Was the camera working at the time?”

“No.”

“You’re joking?”

“It’s a pseudo,” scoffed Myriad.

“A what?” Leslie asked.

“It’s a fake camera,” advised Kendal.

“The owner of the café doesn’t want to spend money on equipment,” added Myriad.

“Thanks for your input,” replied Kendal. “Please, I insist you stay outside.” He watched her leave before moving seats so he could have one eye on the witness and one eye on the door. “I need to know the name of the person who owns the café?”

“Mr. Bridge is overseas at the moment. He won’t be back for three months. The person in charge of the day shift asked him for a contact phone number before he left. I heard he refused the request. He really is an ass.”

“Why work for the man?”

“Mr. Bridge is the only one I could find who seemed willing to put me on with the hours I needed.”

“Leslie thanks for your time.” Kendal looked at Claire. “We’re done here, it’s time to go.”

It took only minutes to have Myriad back to where she lived. Kendal noted the quiet neighbourhood. The high noise pollution wall running along the entire length of freeway did a great job.

“Please come into my house for an early breakfast,” said Myriad.

“No thanks,” replied Kendal.

“Yes we’d love to come in,” urged Claire, scrunching her nose at Kendal. “We’re both hanging out for a coffee.”

“On second thoughts a mug of coffee might go down smoothly,” added Kendal.

Myriad led the way to the front door. Both detectives followed her into the house.

“Detectives, feel free to relax. I’ll put the kettle on,” mentioned Myriad.

Kendal slapped Claire on the shoulder, whispering. “Good idea over the coffee. I didn’t have enough time to search the house the first time.”

Both detectives split up. Claire entered a room adjacent to the kitchen. Kendal walked down the hall glancing at a painting hanging on the wall. The first open door he stepped into what appeared to be a study. He spied a bookshelf full of books along one wall, noting each book was placed in alphabetical order. Spying a computer in the middle of a table he wandered over. The cursor blinked silently at the top left-hand side of the monitor. A black leather chair had been pushed under the table. The whole room and the entire house appeared tidy. Kendal glanced over his shoulder at the doorway before moving the wireless mouse. The computer busy light turned solid. The monitor blinked on. A page of text brought Kendal in closer. He commenced to speed read, a gift he’d mastered at an early age. He’d read over ten pages before he heard a cough coming from the lounge. Before scurrying out of the room, Kendal turned the monitor off.

“Do you like the painting?” asked Myriad.

“Excuse me?” asked Kendal.

“The painting in the hall, the one you’ve been studying, do you like it?”

“Interesting.”

“To me, a woman looking at herself in the mirror isn’t interesting.”

“I do,” blurted Kendal.

“I didn’t know you liked paintings.”

“I didn’t know you could paint?”

“Why do you think I painted it?” asked Myriad.

“The artist has the initials ‘MS’ scratched in the bottom right-hand corner. Since your name is Myriad Sutcliff, I assumed you painted it.”

“You’re extremely observant.”

“It’s my job.” Kendal watched the woman placing the coffee mugs on the low table in the exact center of the room.

“If you’re wondering why I’m so fussy,” hinted Myriad, looking at Kendal and Claire “I can’t stand anything out of whack. Everything has been allotted the correct place.”

“I have a question,” hinted Kendal, swiping a blue mug from off the table, downing the brown liquid in a single gulp. “Can you explain to me why you didn’t know my daughter or my partner were free from the kidnapper?”

Myriad looked like she’d swallowed a bird. “I’d like to believe my medium powers are perfect. I have to confess every so often they do let me down. The longer I use my gift the more expert I become. I used to only obtain a ten percent pass rate, now I’m up to around the ninety percent mark. I have a little ways to go.”

Kendal watched the woman walk off. He heard her whistling softly before stepping into the study, retrieved a page of text from the desk drawer and shoved it under Kendal’s nose.

“Seeing how you are observant, can you pick out any spelling mistakes on this page? It’s an extract from my novel.”

“I don’t think I’m qualified to be a proofreader.”

“Please try. I’m bursting at the seams to show someone my work.”

Kendal took hold of the page.

“Please, read it out loud. It’s so I can hear how my novel is shaping.”

“I know your secret,” quoted Kendal, starting at the top of the page.

“At the moment it’s a working title,” interrupted Myriad.

“Personally, I like the title. Let’s see how it starts. A good beginning is a must.”

“You seem to be quite apt at reading English, Detective.”

Claire decided to lean casually against the wall, sipping her coffee. She looked amused at the English lesson.

Kendal focused on the page. He cleared his throat before starting. “The detective known as Kendall walked from the courthouse. For a brief few seconds, he froze. The media resembled a lynch mob, waiting for him to descend the steps. The sniper aimed his hunting rifle at the cop wearing the black duffel coat and pulled the trigger.”

Kendal dug his nose from the page, glaring at Myriad.

“What do you think? Please inform me of your honest opinion.”

“Why are you writing about me?”

“You’re the perfect character. Of course, I’ll change your name to something more exciting. The name needs to have more finesse. I’ve been thinking your character should have more authority, maybe even a nasty streak.”

“I repeat my question.”

“I required a character for my book. I also needed a realistic view. I promise everything you’ve gone through will be changed. It should make an exciting book. Claire, what do you think?” asked Myriad.

“I’m speechless.”

“There is one spelling mistake I’ve come across,” reported Kendal.

Myriad pouted. “Are you sure? I’ve proofread the entire manuscript.”

Kendal threw the sheet back at her before leading Claire towards the door.

“There are no spelling mistakes,” insisted Myriad. “You’re just upset I’ve based my character on you.”

Kendal looked over his shoulder. “My name is spelt with one ‘L’ not two.” He waited only long enough for Claire to step outside before slamming the front door shut. Slipping behind the wheel of his car, Kendal hammered the accelerator pedal to its stop.

Claire looked relaxed sitting in the passenger seat. She gave Kendal a sleepy look. “The novel she’s writing is too much of a coincidence.”

Over the screaming of the engine, Kendal answered. “The page I read out loud just happened to be the exact duplicate of what was on the computer screen. Being a medium, Myriad should have known how to correctly spell my name.”

“What other incriminating evidence did you find?”

Easing the car into the curb, Kendal stared at his partner. “She wrote the same passage over and over. I scrolled through ten pages of typed pages. Every page was the same except the last one. On it, the word ‘again’ had been written.”

“She’s a weird woman,” gushed Claire.

“You’re not telling me nothing.” Kendal clicked his fingers. “A thought has just struck me. I’m due in court tomorrow afternoon over this snow dropping allegation. I have a feeling I’m going to be shot, again.”

Claire looked Kendal in the eyes. “Again, leaves a bad taste in your mouth.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

KENDAL PACED the floor of his study, holding his mobile phone to his ear. Marg and Claire were sitting on chairs watching his antics.

“There’s no answer from GP,” reported Kendal. Placing the phone back into his pocket, he rubbed the stubble on his chin.

A noise at the window saw him walk across the room.

The bushes growing in front of the window blocked the light, preventing him from seeing out. Kendal heard Marg gasp. He turned in time to see a man wearing a wide-brimmed hat enter the room.

“Hi there,” whispered the man.

“Nice of you to drop by,” said Kendal, stepping away from the window. “How did you get from one side of the house to my study door so quick?”

“I could say I’m a magician. However, I don’t want to sound too corny in front of a couple of beautiful ladies. I simply tossed a few stones at a bush next to the window. When you went to investigate, I slipped inside your home. You should lock the front door.”

“I deliberately left it open,” hinted Kendal. “I knew you’d show.”

“I’ll buy the reason.” Chuckling, the man lifted his hands into the air.

“I’m not sure I appreciate you in my home,” blurted Marg.

“Fear not nice lady, I’d never harm a member of the Kendal family or associates,” advised GP, palming a hand towards Claire.

“Seeing how you didn’t answer your phone I can ask my question face to face.”

“Ask and you shall receive,” replied GP, chuckling. He lowered his hat so the angle completely covered his eyes.

“I need a favour,” stated Kendal.

“I’m listening.”

“I’m due at the courthouse in a few hours. I need you and Claire to look out for a sniper on a rooftop or on the street.”

“I’ll keep a watchful eye out. By the way, you’ll easily win the fake snow-dropping case,” mentioned GP. He turned his head in the direction of Claire and Marg. “Ladies.” He stepped backwards through the open doorway and vanished

“Interesting,” chirped Claire.

“I know you believe the man to be a friend,” grumbled Marg breathing a huge sigh of relief. “I’m glad he’s gone.”

“I take him at his word he’d never hurt anyone in our family,” blurted Kendal.

Marg walked over to hug her husband. “I suppose you’re right, he did save me from the gun happy bandit. Next time you see GP ask him to stay for dinner.”

“He managed to save you, Tegan, Tani and your mother,” corrected Kendal.

“I’d like to invite myself when he comes,” interrupted Claire. “It’s not illegal in getting to know the bloke.” She raised an eyebrow at the idea. “I’m off to bed. Seeing how I have to track down a sniper tomorrow I don’t want to feel tired.”

It looked to be business as usual in the city the next morning.

Kendal glanced about the surrounding area near the courthouse. Nothing appeared to be different. People, dressed in work attire, hurried past oblivious to the fact they could be in the sniper’s line of sight. A cop car stopped at the red light. It turned left the moment the light changed to green and a busker settled himself down for the day.

Kendal adjusted the black bulletproof vest he wore under his duffel coat and stepped into the room opposite Supreme Court one. A young rookie cop gave him a sharp nod before glancing about the room. Lawyers bustling past on their way to other courtrooms didn’t give him a second glance.

Still feeling relaxed Kendal tapped out Claire’s phone number on his mobile phone pad.

“Partner, anything to report?” he whispered.

“No, nothing. I did spy GP five minutes ago on another rooftop. He saluted by dipping his wide-brimmed hat before vanishing. The man moves so fast, he doesn’t seem human.”

“I can assure you he is.”

Kendal slipped his phone back into his pocket, feeling confident nothing will happen before the hearing ended.

“All rise,” called a deep voice.

Standing, Kendal didn’t bother to look around the courtroom for the man. He watched the Judge enter the room through a side door. For a few seconds, The Judge glanced about the room full of media personnel and lawyers before settling himself in his black leather seat. He nodded at the twelve jurors then the two lawyers. Focusing on the jurors the Judge began a short informative summary of what they will be asked to decide.

“Today you will hear evidence against a detective. His name is Alan James Kendal. He has allegedly been charged with snow dropping. The word is used to describe an act of stealing ladies underwear off clothes lines. The defense will argue any evidence brought to the court’s attention. It is up to you, the jury, to decide whether there is enough evidence for a guilty verdict or not. I estimate the length of the case should only take a couple of hours. Afterwards, you will all be relieved from jury service for the next two years.”

Hearing his name being called, Kendal stepped over to the witness stand.

“State your name?”

“Detective Alan James Kendal.”

“Do you swear, to tell the truth, the whole truth so help you, God.”

“I do.”

“You may sit Detective Kendal,” instructed the Judge.

Kendal watched the lawyer approaching. He looked new to the business. The expression painted on his face depicted he felt eager to make a name for himself so he could climb the

corporate ladder. The rake-thin lawyer whispered a few sentences to the Judge before walking over to the witness stand.

Kendal flashed the man a casual grin.

“What’s the look for?” he growled.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

“Meaning?”

“All will be explained,” advised Kendal.

“Start the questions,” commanded the Judge. “I know about today. The sooner we begin the quicker we can get to the finale.”

The lawyer picked up a black garbage bag. “Have you ever seen this bag before?”

“Yes,” replied Kendal.

The young lawyer faced the jury. He reported in a matter-of-fact voice. “Detective Kendal, you know the drill, I need you to expand your answers.”

“I answered your question.”

“When did you see the bag last?”

“The night the boys in blue raided my home.”

“Now we are getting somewhere.”

Kendal glanced at his watch before staring at the lawyer.

“Do you have somewhere other than prison you needs to go?”

“Yes, I have. Keep this mock court case moving.”

Pointing his finger at Kendal, the lawyer’s face reddened.

“The bag is full of women’s undergarments. They were found in your home. Do you deny stealing them?”

“How do I know what you’re saying is true?” questioned Kendal, giving the lawyer a run for his money.

The man pulled a handful of ladies knickers out of the bag, dropping them under Kendal’s nose. “Have you seen these before?”

“As a matter of fact, I have.”

“So you admit to stealing them.”

“No. Move on,” urged Kendal.

“You’re stubborn attitude is not helping you.”

“Keep moving,” groaned the Judge.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit extreme every one of the undergarments looks brand new? Some still have the supermarket price tag attached. It’s plain to see I’ve been set up,” stated Kendal.

Again he studied his watch. Glancing at the Judge he gave a sharp nod.

“Jurors, thank you for your time, you are dismissed,” advised the Judge. He lifted his hand into the air to signal a halt to the proceedings. “All charges against Detective Alan James Kendal are also dismissed. This case is closed.”

“What’s going on?” barked the lawyer.

Kendal stepped down from the witness box. Walking over to the Judge, he shook his hand.

“Do you think this court has given the sniper enough time?” asked the Judge.

“There’s only one way to find out.”

Kendal walked across the floor, smacking the lawyer on the shoulder. “Stay in here. Things might get a little heated in about one minute.”

On a rooftop adjacent to the courthouse a shadow brushed the low wall of the building’s rooftop when a man searched for the perfect place. He’d been given another message. Shoot the same Detective for a second time. The outcome must be the same. He’d be paid double if the bullet entered the exact spot as last time.

Making no noise the sniper walked across the warm rooftop. He stopped briefly to slip out of his black jumper. Picking up his briefcase he continued to the side of the building where he squatted. Looking over the wall at the steps of the courthouse, the sniper felt the hint of a breeze. The air conditioner unit in the middle of the building rumbled to life. The man’s face revealed a concrete expression while he set to work assembling his hunting rifle.

GP lifted his wide-brimmed hat from his eyes and waited for the sniper to be completely preoccupied before moving. When he felt satisfied, he moved towards the intruder making less noise than he did. The man appeared to be too absorbed in opening his black felt case and assembling the rifle to sense he might have been watched. He lifted a single bullet to eye level, studying the dynamics of its shape. He seemed to ponder over its construction before lowering it back into the case. He picked out the second bullet. Swiveling the contour shape between his thumb and forefinger he eventually slid the bullet into the chamber of the rifle and continued his quest to be ready on time.

“This is too easy,” he whispered.

The sniper lifted his weapon totally unaware a man wearing a wide-brimmed hat stood not more than four metres away directly behind him.

The gunman stared down over the wall to the street below. Studying the crowd of reporters congregating at the foot of the courthouse stairs he smirked dryly at a man wearing a long black duffel coat exiting the courthouse.

“Instant replay,” he whispered. “Come to papa, Detective Kendal. What a shame I’m paid to miss, yet again. Maybe the next time I’ll be paid to kill you. How easy will it be for me to accidentally snuff you out?”

The sniper shifted his body weight so he could be balanced on both knees. He hunched his shoulders before exhaling. He looked comfortable. Easing his finger onto the trigger his short limb constricted slightly.

“One more step and it’ll be bye-bye,” he whispered.

The sniper froze when he felt the hollow metal rod being pushed into his left cheek.

“Don’t ever count on a successful shot, punk,” whispered GP. “I’d reconsider pulling the trigger.”

“I wasn’t going to snuff out the cop.”

“Glad to hear it. I’m not sure you’ll be happy to know I’m thinking seriously about watching you draw your last breath.”

“Are you going to kill me?”

GP pushed the barrel of his weapon deeper into the man’s cheek. “If I told you your life was about to end we would not be having this conversation. However, at this time of day, I think we should have a small talk.”

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

“Wrong answer.” GP slid the barrel of the gun across the sniper’s cheek, stopping it behind his left ear. “I want you to gently place the rifle on the rooftop.”

“My contract doesn’t involve you. If you leave now I’ll forget we ever met.”

“What I said for you to do is not debatable. I know the cop. I don’t want to see him hurt.”

“So you’re not a cop?”

“Me a cop, don’t make me laugh.”

“If what you say is true, I don’t have a gripe against you.”

GP grabbed handcuffs from his pocket, placing one end over the man’s left wrist.

“What are you up to?”

“Shhh.” GP kicked the rifle from the sniper’s hand, clamping the other end of the handcuffs through a ring bolted into the wall of the building. He stepped back to view his handy work.

“Be a man. Take the hat off so I can see your face.”

“It’s not a good idea.”

“Why not, are you scared at the thought of me seeing your face and coming after you?”

“Not on your gravesite. If you saw my face you’d have to die. I assume you want to live?”

The man sat on his knees in silence. He watched GP pick up his hunting rifle and aim it at the crowd.

“Are you on my side?” he questioned frowning.

GP ignored the man. His finger constricted on the trigger. He heard a pop. The man standing immediately behind Kendal fell to the ground. The crowd started to scream before scattering like ants.

Kendal glanced at the roof.

Myriad ducked into a fetal position. She looked up, pointing to the rooftop. “The sniper’s on the roof across the road.”

Kendal squatted to check the man lying on the ground. The bullet entered through his forehead. A slow growing red pool started flooding the step. He died before he hit the ground.

GP placed the gun next to the sniper before walking off. He pushed the lift call button. When the doors opened he stepped into the lift car and pressed the second-floor button.

“You can’t leave me here. I thought we were on the same side?” yelled the sniper.

Under his wide-brimmed hat, GP grinned. “You know what thought did?”

The lift doors opened on the second floor. GP casually walked down the stairs. He walked across the lobby and stepped out into the sunshine. He paused to light a cigar before walking across the road. He made a bee-line for Kendal. He needed to dodge reporters and cops as they crawled about on their hands and knees hoping to avoid another sniper bullet. GP’s short-sleeved checkered shirt and black peaked cap helped him to blend into the sea of faces. Stepping up to Kendal, he felt no resistance. Unnoticed, he slipped the detective a small folded piece of paper and walked away un-detained.

Kendal unfolded the paper. There were twelve typed words.

THE SECOND CONTRACT ON ME IS NOW NULL AND VOID. HAVE FUN.

Kendal led the charge across the road. He burst into the lobby, staring at the surprised expression on the concierge. The late teen lad's jaw dropped open. His finger hovered in the air when he saw ten cops and one gypsy looking woman sprinting into the lift.

"Check your weapons," blurted Kendal pushing the roof button. "I want the sniper alive. There will be no excuse."

The lift doors opened to the sunshine. The group quickly fanned out to scour the entire rooftop.

They located the sniper in less than a minute.

"Police," yelled Kendal at the man.

The sniper raised his one free hand. "I didn't shoot the man. I was only paid to shoot Kendal and given strict orders to miss."

"Your statement has a familiar ring to it," hinted Kendal.

"I didn't do anything."

"Does the rifle belong to you?" yelled a uniformed cop from the side of the air-conditioner unit.

"Yes," answered the man quickly. "I'm being set up."

Kendal stared the man down. "By whom?"

"A man wearing a wide-brimmed hat."

"Did anyone see a person wearing a wide brimmed hat?" asked Kendal eyeballing the group of cops.

Closing in on the man squatting at the building's low wall, they all shook their heads.

"What about these handcuffs. Why chain myself to the roof if I'm guilty?"

"I have no idea. Why don't you tell me?" questioned Kendal.

"I have already told you who pulled the trigger."

"Book this man for murder and take him away."

"You have to believe me. I didn't shoot anyone."

"There's a dead man on the steps of the courthouse. Do you want to change your plea?"

"No."

"Who did it?" asked Claire.

"Please, you must believe me. Search the area. The man who pulled the trigger wore a wide brimmed hat," yelled the sniper.

"Take a look around, nobody here fits the description of the man," growled Kendal.

"He must have snuck past you," replied the sniper, looking a little edgy. "Someone must have seen him. Ask around."

Kendal hovered over the man. "I think this story of yours is completely fictitious. Constable, un-cuff the man from the ring and take him to Police Headquarters where he'll be formally charged."

"These handcuffs are a dead ringer for police cuffs. What do you reckon?" quizzed the rookie cop, handing them over.

Kendal studied the handcuffs. "They certainly look like it." He pulled the note GP gave him from his pocket. "I wonder?" He tore the note into ten small squares and threw it over the side of the building. He stood watching the torn sections float slowly to the ground. Kendal

turned his back on the wall and marched across the rooftop. Stepping into the lift his thoughts were focused on the possibility GP might actually be a cop.

The group of cops skirted the media loitering around outside by walking through the kitchen of the hotel. They bundled the sniper into a divisional van before driving away.

At Police Headquarters, Kendal walked into the interview room followed by Claire. He marched across the floor and stood opposite the sniper.

The man looked relaxed. Quite the professional. If he felt nervous he didn't show it.

"Start talking," insisted Kendal. He sat glaring at the sniper through heartless eyes.

"I didn't shoot the man on the street."

"Let's start at the beginning. Let's say I believe you. I want to know why you were on the roof of the building. I want you to confess to me what you intended to do."

"Do what?"

Kendal shook his head, sitting back in the chair. "You're not cooperating."

The man leaned forward, clasping his hands together. "The rifle doesn't belong to me."

"Who owns the weapon?"

"I've no idea."

"If you don't start talking you'll find yourself in jail for the rest of your life."

"Whatever."

Kendal began to pace the floor. Eventually, he stopped to stare at the man. He wore a distracted expression.

"Do you know anything about four missing teenage girls?"

"No."

"Can you understand if you keep confessing nothing you'll give me no option, I'll have to book you for murder, kidnapping and the murder of a drowned girl."

"I do understand. I didn't kill the man on the courthouse step. I don't know nothin' about the missing kids."

"I know for a fact you shot me. I want to hear a full confession. You have thirty seconds to begin or you'll be thrown in jail. Why were you on the rooftop?"

Summing up his options the man sighed heavily. Five years for attempted murder or life over the murder of the stranger standing behind his target. On top of those charges, you'll receive jail time over the missing kids. He sighed again, looking Kendal in the eyes.

"You mightn't like the truth."

"Try me."

Kendal sat, watching the man's every move, searching for a moment of weakness. He needed something, a gesture, a rogue twitch to get a start. He needed a strong lead to catch the kidnapper who abducted the girls.

"I was actually on the roof to shoot you a second time."

A shock wave of panic tore through Kendal. He forced himself to remain in check.

"The man you shot happened to be an innocent bystander."

"I didn't shoot the man. I almost pulled the trigger, when a man wearing a wide-brimmed hat persuaded me not to."

"What did he look like?"

"I don't know. The stranger kept his face well hidden."

“You confessed you were the one who shot me earlier. You’ve also admitted to being on the roof to shoot me again.”

The man nodded.

“Did you leave the note in the two bullet casings?”

The man nodded again as his lips curled up at the ends. “I did exactly what I was paid to do.”

“Who paid you to miss?”

“I don’t know. The phone rang in the middle of the night. A voice offered me a job. After explaining what needed to be done I agreed. It sounded like an easy job which paid a lot of money. The voice told me when I completed the job to slide down the wire. Inside the room, I’d find three large white envelopes on the coffee table. They were packed full of one hundred dollar notes, totaling fifty thousand dollars.”

“What if you killed me?”

“The voice sounded crystal clear. If you died there’d be no money. I’d be the next target. Somebody else killed the man in question today. He’s trying to pin it on me.”

“I need to know about the missing teenage girls?”

“I don’t kidnap anyone. Never have; never will. I’m a sniper. It’s the only thing I do.”

Kendal stopped the interview and escorted the man to the front desk.

“Book him on murder and attempted murder. Facing the man he added. “Even if you didn’t kill the innocent man, it’s up to the jury to decide.”

Kendal collected Claire on his way out of the building.

“Sugar, do you believe in the story he spun?”

“I’m not a liberty to say. I’ll let you know later.”

“When will we be going to retrieve the bodies of the missing girls?”

“Right now,” advised Kendal.

CHAPTER TWENTY

KENDAL DROVE Claire to the wharf at the Port of Melbourne. It appeared to be a bustling world all of its own. Several dozen sailors who had disembarked from a navy ship were loitering about waiting for a fleet of taxis to arrive so they could make their way to the nearest hotel. Claire received several hoots the moment the two detectives began to walk towards the police launch. For once Claire only grinned at their good mood.

“Not even a slight deviation towards the sailors?” questioned Kendal. He looked sideways at Claire who started grinning at a middle-aged man in an officer’s uniform.

“I don’t date sailors or fishermen. A girl has to have rules.”

Reaching the side of the ten-metre police boat, Kendal could hear its twin motors idling.

A Constable pushed the police launch away from the dock the moment the two detectives clambered onto the deck.

“Detective Kendal, welcome aboard. I’m Captain Jeff Parker in charge of this vessel.”

“This woman is my partner, Detective Claire Ambroso.”

“I’ve read your report,” said Parker. “Claire, do you have any idea where you were forced into the water?” He palmed an open hand towards a small oval shaped doorway.

“Not really,” confessed Claire, stepping onto the bridge. “In the dark, the lights of the shore looked dim. All I know is a large cargo ship was to stop over the top of us. At the same time the harbor master was getting on or off, two divers were to swim down to take us up to the ship. Before we entered the water the kidnapper pointed to a large approaching vessel.”

“Sounds like you were in the middle of the channel. The rendezvous point might have been close to the heads of Port Phillip Bay. All the large ships stop to allow the harbour master to board or disembark the ship.” Captain Parker faced Constable Gerard. “Set a course towards the entrance to the bay. Stay in the channel. Be mindful of any ships.”

The police launch surged ahead. The wind felt cool. The sea looked calm.

“Detectives, step this way, I’ll bring up the ocean map,” said Parker. “Can you roughly estimate how much time ticked off from the moment you saw the approaching ship and when you were picked up by the divers?”

“Ten maybe fifteen minutes,” recalled Claire.

Parker brought up the information on the ship’s laptop. The group stepped over to the Tasmanian oak table to study the map of the bay. Parker punched up some numbers entered in by the harbor master.

Kendal clicked his fingers. “When you were running on the beach, I spotted a small boat dropping something in the water.”

“How large was the boat?” asked Parker.

“Too far away to tell.”

Parker began to mumble latitude and longitude numbers while the computer went into think mode.

“What did you say?” asked Kendal.

“I recited the latitude and longitude of our intended position.”

Kendal’s eyes gave away his excitement.

“Sugar, you look like you’ve just won the lottery?”

“Maybe I have. Captain, if I were to say to you the numbers: 38-10 and 144-50 where exactly will we be on the bay?”

“Those numbers sound exactly like what I need to pinpoint the location where you were dropped off Detective Ambroso.”

Captain Parker ran a pencil line horizontal and vertical on a laminated map he pulled from a drawer under the table while the boat slowly rolled lazily sideways on several low waves created by a cargo ship.

“38 degrees 10 S latitude and 144 degrees 50 E longitude.” He looked at the laptop to check his figures before looking at the two detectives. “Those exact numbers you recited puts us right over the top of the sinkhole at the mouth of Port Phillip bay.”

Claire started jumping. “It looked like a sink hole we were in. Partner, how did you know?”

“The numbers in girl’s paintings had the exact same numbers; the latitude and longitude of the sinkhole. I’ll stake my reputation on it if the events went wrong, somebody might figure it out so the girls could be found.”

“Something did go wrong,” moaned Claire.

“I’m not sure if it’s a good thing or not,” confessed Kendal. “Either the girls spend the rest of their lives married into a harem in some country or they drown. I’m tossing up which might be worse.”

The boat stopped directly over the sink hole. While the boat settled in the almost calm sea, two police divers prepared to jump into the water. Both were given two long ropes each.

The captain walked over to give last minute instructions.

“If you find a corpse or two, tie one end of the rope to their diving gear. Don’t forget to ascend slowly. We’ll bring the bodies to the surface after you’re back onboard. You have exactly ten minutes before the next cargo ship enters the bay. Any longer and we’ll have to move off. Be careful of any sharks hanging around the sinkhole.”

Both divers nodded, inserted their mouthpieces and placed their masks over their eyes. Slipping beneath the surface, they barely made a splash. They followed the anchor chain straight down. They didn’t seem to be in a hurry or flustered at the sudden appearance of three, two-metre sharks circling the sink hole. The divers looked at each other before descending over the edge of the sinkhole.

Visibility dropped the further the divers descended. At the bottom of the hole, the divers hovered a half metre above the mud. Their movements were minimal. Their intrusion left the bottom of the hole undisturbed. Both divers switched on heavy duty torches. The beams of light split the darkened water. The sides of the sinkhole were smooth and pockmarked where crabs burrowed. An eel poked its head out of one hole, opening its mouth at being disturbed. The divers waved it away before venturing into the middle of the hole.

One of the divers pointed to a figure looking directly at them. They swam over and stared at the corpse of a young female. Her mouth was open. Her face mask lay at her feet. The girl looked like she might have been screaming for help when she drowned. One of the divers checked her diving gear. The air gauge read full. The police diver scrunched his nose and proceeded to tie off the girl. The remains of the two alleged divers from the cargo ship were discovered. Their torso and tanks were tied off before the police divers ascended slowly to the surface. They stopped to sit on the fringe of the sinkhole looking down into the abyss. They needed to wait for the correct amount of time to avoid the bends before ascending to the surface.

At the halfway point, they were confronted by a two-metre grey nurse shark. It circled close. Its lifeless eyes watched the prey. Its circle tightened. Its unblinking eyes never lost sight of the two divers. Both men leaned sideways to extract a razor sharp hunting knife from their sheath strapped to their ankle. The blade of each knife glistened in the light of their torches. The moment the shark moved in for a snack both police divers swung their blades. The metal tip of one knife cut a small gash in the shark’s side. The beast quickly swam off. A trail of red followed.

One of the divers checked his watch, signaling one minute. The other nodded, watching for the return of the shark.

He didn't have to wait long. It came back at full throttle. It didn't circle or back off. It came in for the kill.

Kendal checked his watch before looking directly at the Captain. "You're men have been down for a long time."

"It doesn't take much to be forced into staying submerged for an extra fifteen minutes. It's not the descent, it's the ascent. If you rise to the surface too fast you'll develop the bends."

"Captain, I don't think the cargo ship approaching will wait for us to get out of the way," said Kendal.

Parker looked at the bridge, barking out a command. "Hoist the anchor."

Below deck Kendal heard a whirring noise. Looking at the front of the launch, he saw the anchor chain starting to be wound up by the automatic winch.

"What if the two men encountered a shark?" asked Claire, looking directly at the Captain.

"Only start to worry if you see red in the water."

Walking off the Captain chuckled acting like he'd just finished telling a humorous joke.

Kendal failed to hear the humour and refocused on the water. Staring closely at the surface his eyes bulged.

"Captain, I think you should take a look at this."

The Captain strolled over to where Kendal stood. Looking over the edge of the boat he nearly dropped his thin cigar out of his mouth. "Red water, it's not a good sign." He sprinted for the aft side of the boat, grabbed hold of an air tank and face mask. In one smooth action, the tank was strapped to his back, the regulator in his mouth. He pulled a knife from a dive belt before jumping into the water. In seconds he resurfaced followed by the two divers. The three men made it to the dive ladder and climbed onboard.

"What happened?" asked Kendal, lending a hand to get the trio into the boat.

"We were twenty feet from the surface when a shark decided he felt hungry," reported the first diver to climb back onto the deck. He stood grinning. "Needless to say, he won't be hungry again."

The Captain climbed into the boat, walked over slapping both divers on the shoulder. "Good job. Detective Kendal, don't be too concerned, my men are professionals. Here, start pulling up the bodies."

"You found the girl?" whispered Claire.

"Yes. We also found the remains of the two divers you mentioned."

"Hopefully one day any other girl who has been kidnapped in the same way might be discovered," said Kendal. "I'll have the commissioner of police ring other countries. It'll be like looking for a piece of glass amongst a sea of diamonds. If they're located I'm sure they'll be full of praise."

One of the divers walked over, holding his hand out. "We found a spare dive mask. It looks new. Here, have it for evidence. Maybe there's a missing girl no one knows about."

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

KENDAL WALKED next to Claire along the cold corridor towards the inner door to the city morgue. They strolled past a lift. Unlike previous times Kendal didn't falter at the noise the metal door made when it slowly opened. Claire looked up at her partner. He could sense what she might be thinking. Yes, he'd finally gotten over the emotion of the kidnapping of Tegan from the maniac arsonist known as Patrick. The case was locked permanently away in a file in his subconscious. Finally, the overhead lights looked to be friendly again.

The coroner, a wiry built man looked up from behind the computer monitor the moment they marched into his office.

"Detective Kendal and Detective Ambroso, it's good to see you again."

"Likewise," agreed, Kendal.

"I assume this isn't a social visit?"

"Your assumption is correct. We're here to talk about the girl who we fished out of the bay."

"She drowned."

"Is that what your official statement will read?"

"Except for a slight variation to the answer, yes. Before the girl drowned she panicked."

"There has to be a reason why she might have panicked," said Claire.

"There could've been a number of reasons," replied the coroner.

"I know the air tank was full, so running out of air couldn't be the reason why she drowned. Tegan and I were told we'd have to wait no more than ten minutes," added Claire.

"The ship might have been delayed possibly due to a mechanical fault," hinted Kendal, throwing into the mix a different approach to the problem. He wanted to divert all blame from the deceased girl.

"It could explain her drowning," stated the coroner.

"We should inform the girl's family," mentioned Claire.

Kendal nodded before leading the way to the door. Claire trotted to keep up.

Kendal slipped behind the wheel of his car. Instead of starting the engine he sat pondering over the fact they found a new face mask. If it belonged to another missing girl, who was she? He turned to Claire.

"What we need is to find out the time each missing girl had been abducted. If we're lucky, the girls are still somewhere on the high seas. If we locate all the girls we can concentrate on who might own the extra face mask."

"Let me get this straight. You want to track all cargo ships which have just left Melbourne destination unknown. When you find the ships you want them searched, hoping to find a missing girl before she becomes a victim to a slave trader who successfully delivers his human cargo into a harem."

"Yes."

"I reckon it might be easier to win the lottery."

"I didn't say anything about it being easy. If we can pinpoint the exact time the teenage girls went missing we might be able to track the movement of the correct cargo ships. If we're

lucky we might be able to get the girls back.” Pulling his mobile phone from his pocket, Kendal tapped up the Police Headquarters phone number.

“Dispatch,” answered a confident woman.

“Detective Kendal here put me through to Captain Hughes.”

A few seconds ticked off before Kendal heard the woman’s voice again.

“Sir, I’m putting you through now.”

Kendal ran his idea past Hughes.

“How quick do you want to know?”

“Five minutes ago. You might want to buzz the hoons who were arrested from the train. They might give a clearer indication. It’s a long shot I know. Maybe one of them might know where each missing girl ended up.”

“Hold the line, I’m on the computer. One missing girl has been found wandering the streets of Perth. Her name is Justine Neiman. There’s still no word on Candice Jones or Simone Grafton. The dead girl was Kerry Dalton.”

“I need to find out where all the cargo ships have gone since leaving Melbourne in the past five days. I believe Simone Grafton or Candice Jones might be on one of those ships. Claire and I will visit Kerry Dalton’s parents to unearth exactly when she disappeared and break the bad news to them. Hopefully, they will be able to help us reduce the search to improve the odds of finding the other girls. If the ship is already at the destination, it’s all over. The girls will never be seen again.”

“For all the girls’ sake let’s hope we’re in time,” replied Hughes.

Kendal eased his car into the flow of traffic. In a few minutes, he turned into the street where Kerry Dalton lived. The area seemed ghostly quiet. The neighbours on either side of the brick veneer house in question parted their curtains to view the man in the long black duffel coat parking in the drive.

“It looks as though the word is out,” blurted Claire. She waved to the woman staring out through the window in the house on her left. The curtains were instantly closed. “This isn’t going to be easy.”

“No, it isn’t. However, we have to discuss the chain of events if Simone Grafton or Candice Jones has a fighting chance to see their parents again, let alone Australian soil. I believe the face mask belonged to one of them.”

Kendal wrapped his knuckles against the solid wooden front door.

“Maybe nobody’s home,” hinted Claire, starting to walk off towards the garage. When she reached out to turn the doorknob on the single door, she heard a muffled voice.

“Who’s there?”

The voice belonged to a woman who sounded frightened.

“I’m Detective Claire Ambroso, Melbourne Homicide, can we have a chat?”

“How do I know you’re not a reporter looking for more pictures?”

Kendal walked over to the garage and spoke to the closed door. “Are you Mrs. Dalton?”

“Yes, please go away. I’m tired of having my picture taken by you reporters. I’m a very private person.”

“Mrs. Dalton, I’m Detective Alan Kendal. It’s imperative we talk.”

The garage door opened slightly. A half stooped woman looked tentatively out. "Please leave, I don't feel well."

Kendal allowed the woman to study his police badge. Opening the door wide, she sheepishly grinned.

"Quick, follow me." Her voice elevated to an almost fever pitch.

Once the two detectives were inside the garage the woman closed the door.

"Why the secrecy?" asked Claire.

"The media have been hounding me for an interview for days over the disappearance of my daughter Kerry. They've made me so nervous I can't sleep, I can't eat. I feel like I'm a prisoner in my own home."

"The neighborhood is clear of the media," reported Claire.

The woman sat on a seat in front of an old portable TV looking distraught.

"Mrs. Dalton time is not on our side," insisted Kendal. "We need to relay some information. We're hoping to get some information in return. What you hear will be uncomfortable, never-the-less it must be said."

"Please call me Annabelle. I'd feel more comfortable if you do."

"Annabelle, we might be able to locate a girl named Simone Grafton."

"What has she got to do with my daughter?" questioned Annabelle, choking on her tears.

"Everything," announced Kendal.

"Your tact is so abrupt," gushed Claire.

Already Annabelle's worried expression made her look older.

"Is the father of your daughter close by?" asked Claire.

"If the two-timing bum ever shows his face on my property again I'll poke his eyes out. The rat of a man left me for a younger model four years ago. It's Kerry and me now."

"Do you have any other children?" asked Claire.

"I've only the one. After Kerry was born the doctor informed me I'd probably never fall pregnant again. She not only has been my child she's my closest friend." Annabelle wiped a tear from her eyes. "If anything bad has happened to my daughter I don't know what I'll do."

"Does a member of your family live close by?" asked Kendal.

"My sister lives an hour away. She's on her own; her husband passed away seven years ago."

Kendal reached out to pat the woman's hand. "Getting back onto the subject of why we are here, I have some news of your daughter."

"Is she alive?"

"Before I answer I really need you to think hard about the following questions."

"You found my baby?"

"I'm not sure," replied Kendal, looking serious. "To confirm who she is I need to see a photo."

Annabelle got to her feet.

"Please, sit, we really need to ask a few questions first," urged Claire.

"You don't understand how much I need to know who you found."

"The only way to be certain is to have you driven down to the morgue for a positive ID."

"We must go right now."

“Please don’t take offence to what I’m about to say,” urged Kendal. “I promise I’ll have my partner drive you when our questions are answered. The lives of two missing teenage girls are a priority. We have to act quickly or else it’ll be too late.”

“Oh dear, please, you have to be in time. What do you need to know?” asked Annabelle, starting to tremble nervously.

Kendal leaned forward. “What we need to know is when exactly did your daughter disappear?”

“I don’t know?”

“Please try to remember.”

“I walked into Kerry’s bedroom to say goodbye. She groaned so I left for work.”

“Was it late in the day, or early morning when you discovered she went missing?”

“I returned home at dusk.”

The opening of the garage door made the woman jump. “My husband Nickolas is home, he’ll know.”

Kendal looked blank at the woman. “I thought by what you were saying you were single?”

“What’s all this?” growled a tall man. Wearing a business suit minus the tie, his handsome looks, and straight back helped make him stand out from the crowd.

Kendal and Claire stood, extending their hands.

“Get out of my house,” he ordered. “When will you media people leave us in peace?”

“We’re both detectives,” blurted Kendal. He extracted his police badge. “We have news of your daughter.”

The man jeered. “Is she in the house?”

“No.”

“I want you to leave. Don’t come back alone.”

“Sir, to get through these next few minutes we need your assistance,” said Claire.

“I don’t know how I can help. She’s not my daughter.”

Kendal eyeballed the man. “Can you enlighten us on what you just told us?”

“What’s there to explain? I don’t care for the girl. She’s my stepdaughter.”

“Surely you and your wife will love to have her home?”

“My wife probably does. I really don’t care. She knows how I feel about the girl. She and I never did get along. I reckon she’s jealous of her mother re-marrying. If you ask my opinion she ran away, staging this whole thing.”

“Are you trying to say you think this disappearing act has been faked?” asked Kendal.

“Yes, I believe the whole charade is one big fat lie. She’s only looking for attention. All kids do at her age.”

“Sir, she’s a little old for mind games,” insisted Claire.

“Seventeen is the right age,” snorted the man. “You mark my words, give the girl a few days, seven at the outside, she’ll come knocking on the door, whining she’s hungry.”

“What we need is an exact time Kerry disappeared,” quizzed Kendal, shaking his head in disgust.

“Like I told you before, I don’t care.”

“Sir, for your wife’s sake, if you know, it’s your responsibility to say.”

“No.”

“Why not?” questioned Claire. “Other than what you believe, what possible reason do you have for not saying?”

“I have my reasons.”

“I think you could at least give an approximate time,” insisted Kendal eyeballing the man suspiciously.

“It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. Satisfied?”

“Not really. Could you be more accurate?”

“Please, I beg you, tell the police what they want to know,” urged Annabelle. The tone in her voice sounded frantic.

“Stop your sniveling pathetic voice,” yelled Nickolas.

The woman clamped her lips closed before falling back onto the chair.

Standing to full height, Kendal puffed out his chest. “May I have a word with you in private? Somewhere outside of the garage walls will suit me.”

The man clicked his fingers at his wife. She acted like an obedient dog. Annabelle sprinted into the house with Claire in hot pursuit.

Kendal wasn’t in the mood for the man so he spoke straight to the point.

“Mr. Dalton, I don’t care about your secrets. I don’t care what you think. I don’t even care if you hate the girl. I’m out to find two missing teenagers. You will tell me what I want to know or I’ll arrest you on grounds of obstructing a police officer trying to do his duty. Understand?”

“Yeah-righty-o I hear you,” snarled Dalton handing over a credit card size photo of Annabelle and Kerry.

“I’ll make it somewhat easy for you. Tell me what I need to know. What we discuss will stay right here in the garage. Take my advice. You owe it to your wife.”

Nickolas folded his arms, staring directly at Kendal. “I was having a wonderful time down at the local.”

“The local pub?”

“No, at the local brothel. I have a permanent weekly appointment with a certain lovely young lass. I’ve been servicing her for at least two years.”

“What time was your appointment?”

“Eight till nine in the morning.”

“Does your wife have any idea?”

“No way.”

“Before my partner and I leave you to sort things out with your wife, I need you to drive Annabelle down to the morgue.”

“Why the morgue?”

Kendal could hear the sobbing screams of Annabelle coming from inside the house. The sobs grew considerably louder when the back door opened.

“Your step daughter is at the morgue. Now I know your secret do you think you’ll ever tell your wife?”

The man shrugged.

“Nickolas, tell me what,” sobbed Annabelle, running up.

Kendal took a step back. "Thank you for the information. Good day to you both."

Kendal and Claire walked down the driveway towards the car. Looking back through the gaps in the pickets of the side fence Kendal watched the scene unfold.

"What's going on?" asked Claire.

"The bloke was having an affair with a prostitute. He doesn't care for his wife. Judging by the tears on Annabelle's face, I think their marriage is finished. Adding to her woes there's the death of her daughter."

Kendal caught sight of a woman barreling towards them. She looked to be on a mission.

"I heard Annabelle screaming," she spat, stopping in the path of the two detectives. "Is my neighbour okay?"

"You are?" asked Kendal.

"I'm Sally, from next door. "Every time I hear Annabelle crying I come over to see if she's okay."

"It's a thoughtful thing to do," soothed Claire.

"Annabelle's husband is useless. He makes Annabelle cry at least three times a week. About six months ago she told me in confidence she thought her husband might be having an affair. One day we followed him. We discovered him at the local brothel." Looking closely at Kendal the woman continued. "Who are you?"

"I'm Detective Kendal Melbourne homicide, my partner Detective Ambroso is standing on my left."

"Hello."

"I think Annabelle will need your support in the coming weeks."

"Have you found her missing daughter yet?"

"Yes, she's been found," blurted Kendal.

Sally slowly nodded. She walked over, entering the garage, closing the single door behind her.

When Kendal opened the car door his mobile phone sounded. Swooping it out of his pocket he spat the word speak.

"Kendal, Hughes here. The missing girl you've been hunting, Simone Grafton is alive. Get over to the hospital. Interview her before the media find out."

"Claire and I are on our way."

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

KENDAL AND Claire marched down the corridor in the opposite direction to the emergency department at the hospital to room thirty-three. Mr. and Mrs. Grafton were already standing outside the door waiting for permission to enter.

Kendal nodded at the two Constables guarding the door to the private room. One Constable spoke into his radio reporting they were back on active duty.

Kendal beckoned Mr. and Mrs. Grafton to join him and Claire inside.

The group burst into the room. Marching to the bed they stood over a teenage girl. Her head looked comfortably buried in the pillow.

“Are you Simone Grafton?” asked Kendal.

The teenager opened her eyes. She nodded before staring at her parents. “Mum, Dad, it’s great to see you. Boy have I got a tale to tell you.”

Simone’s parents burst into tears the moment they hugged their daughter.

“Simone, for the record, what is your full name?” asked Kendal.

“Simone Lucy Grafton.”

“I’m Detective Kendal; this woman is my partner Detective Claire Ambroso. We are pleased you managed to escape.”

“We are extremely happy to meet you,” chirped Claire. “We’ve been trying to trace your movements for some time. Are you able to explain how you escaped? Please try to remember any new pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, starting with a description of the person who abducted you?”

The girl sat upright in bed, pushing her shoulders against the wall. “I never saw his face.” Her voice sounded how she looked; relieved.

Pushing her back against the wall to get comfortable, Simone began her incredible story.

“I sat alone on the train going towards Riddles Creek. My grandmother lives out there. Sorry mum, I wagged school. I wanted to see her. I planned to be home for dinner. I was dragged from the train, shoved in the door of a white van and ended up in a shipping container. I hadn’t been there long before I was ordered to wear a wetsuit. The hooded man instructed me to stay calm. He promised I’d be picked up in about ten minutes. I stood on the muddy bottom of the bay watching for sharks, hoping the man didn’t lie. I forced myself to stay calm, trying to plan a way to escape. A large ship stopped directly overhead. Two divers rescued me from a watery grave. They escorted me to the surface. At first, I felt relieved. After climbing the rope ladder a bag was tied about my head. The diver spoke five words. ‘If you want to live, keep quiet.’

I was led down a long flight of stairs before roughly pushed into a small room. The first escape plan I thought up seemed futile. No matter how hard I searched the barren room I couldn’t find a way to escape. There were no portholes. The room smelt heavy of diesel fumes. It resembled an old-fashioned prison cell. I knew the only help will come from me. I forced myself not to lose it by refusing to cry. I convinced myself if I kept calm I’d escape. My mind told me I might be in the middle of a human slave trading scheme. I’d rather die than be incarcerated into a harem for a sex slave in another country. I wanted to go home. I stumbled upon what I believed might be a perfect plan. Besides, I couldn’t think of anything else. At least I wanted to believe it to be a solid plan. I’m a good swimmer thanks to my mum. The few high diving lessons I’d taken recently, were, I hoped, about to be put to good use. I glued my ear to the metal door, waiting patiently for any tell-tale noise someone might be coming. I eventually heard muffled footsteps approaching. They came quick. I didn’t have time to change my mind. When I thought the person drew level to my prison door I faked an asthma attack. The bloke fell for it. He cautiously unlocked the door, took one look at me lying on the floor gasping for breath and rushed me upstairs to the fresh air. I saw land not far off. I guessed it

might be Gabo Island. We'd just completed an assignment at school on the island which included its where-a-bouts. We were moving past the land at a rate of knots. I waited for the two men guarding me to relax before kicking them both in the groin. I sprinted past a heap of diving equipment, managing to swipe up a face mask. I ran for the side of the ship. I didn't stick around to contemplate the pros and cons of what I planned. When I dived overboard I never hesitated. I completed a somersault in the air, hitting the water feet first. I dived deep, praying nobody will be brave enough to follow. I swam under the ship towards the island. Only one thing went wrong in my plan, the face mask was blown off my face when I hit the water. I watched it falling towards the ocean floor. I did attempt to retrieve it but a strong current sucked me in and swept me at speed towards Gabo island. I wasn't strong enough to swim out of the current. All I could do was watch those hard rocks speeding towards me. I can tell you they made me feel slightly nervous. Each time I rose up on a crest of a swell I looked for a place to land. I reckon I needed to correct my position more than a dozen times. Eventually, I came to the breakwater. I did my best to time the perfect size wave which would dump me on the rocks. Even though the wetsuit I wore was shredded, I felt happy to be on dry land. I only received a mild case of hypothermia, a few cuts and bruises. After the lighthouse keeper found me I eventually arrived here at this hospital."

"What a remarkable story," blurted Mr. Grafton.

"You were one of the lucky girls," hinted Kendal.

"There were others?" asked Simone.

Claire nodded. "The girl after you drowned. Who knows how many more have been sent overseas?"

"You, my partner, my daughter and a street kid are the only ones who made it back alive," said reported.

"I hope you find the person responsible for such a horrific act."

"He'll be caught. Can you tell me any other details you might have left out?"

Simone shook her head. "Nothing."

"Did you happen to see the name of the ship?"

"No. I was too busy watching for any crew member to even think of looking for a name."

"Understandable," remarked Kendal. His voice gave away his disappointment. "Do you have any idea where you were going?"

"None, the crew didn't speak. The only thing they did was drag me along by my arms. I still have the bruises to prove it. Besides, I wore a hessian bag over my head the moment I climbed out of the ocean."

"What about the small room you were being held a prisoner in?"

"It was a dark green barren room. I thought maybe it might have been a storage room emptied for my kidnapping."

"No furniture, bed or a bag of rags?" asked Kendal.

"Nope, not even a blanket to keep warm."

"I might get my daughter to give you a lesson at the spinning game."

"What game?"

Kendal chuckled. "It's a game I made up. The rules are simple. Spin around three times and see what you can use to get out of a tight situation."

“I thought I did okay?”

“You did very well. Congratulations. Claire, I think it’s time we left these good people to catch up on their gossip.”

Kendal shook both ladies hands and Mr. Grafton’s then escorted his partner out of the room.

“The spinning game?” quizzed Claire, pushing the lift call button.

“I thought it was a good game. It’s a shame every school in Australia don’t teach it in their curriculum. It could save a lot of kids from being kidnapped.”

Claire shook her head. “Maybe you should travel from school to school teaching kids the game?”

“I thought you’d be the one to do it. Seeing how you were retired.”

“You just said the magic word, Sugar. Were retired.”

“Maybe I should suggest it becomes a board game?”

“You do love to take the easy road,” giggled Claire.

“Always.”

The moment the detectives stepped into the hospital car park Kendal’s mobile phone shrilled. He let it ring out.

“Sugar, you should’ve answered the phone.”

Kendal extracted it from his pocket to listen to the voice message. “You’re right. The message came from Hughes. He didn’t sound too thrilled with not being able to reach me. There’s been a phone call demanding ransom money.”

“At Police Headquarters?”

“No, at LM’s house, let’s go.”

Myriad stood leaning on Kendal’s car. She greeted the two Detectives before they arrived.

“I knew I’d find you here. If it’s okay I’d like to tag along. I know you’re going to drive to Sam Arnold’s house. Her parents have only now received a phone call demanding they pay ransom money.”

“How did you know?” jeered Kendal, suspiciously.

“Detective, I’m surprised you’ve forgotten so easily. I’m psychic.”

“Get in. The clock’s ticking.”

Kendal gave Myriad the ride of her life by driving at breakneck speed to Riddles Creek. She didn’t seem too phased over the quick trip.

At LM’s house, Kendal sprinted up the drive to the front door. He found it open. He ran inside the house and found Crystal sobbing in the corner next to the phone.

“What’s the message?” he asked.

Claire burst into the room followed by Myriad.

“I was outside when I heard the phone ring. By the time I came inside he hung up. I replayed the message. I ran screaming into the backyard towards Jeff.”

“Where’s Sam?” asked Claire.

Crystal wiped the tears from her eyes. “She ran up behind me to find out what happened. I ordered her to locate her brother and hide in her room.”

“Is it okay if I go find them?” asked Claire.

“Sure. She should be upstairs, the second door on your left.”

Standing in the doorway leading into the kitchen, LM folded his arms.

“I’m not sure what to make of all this. Sam is safe in her room,” he blurted.

“This is exactly why I wanted Sam’s rescue to be kept quiet. I wanted the kidnapper to be convinced Sam drowned. If he needs girls for the sex trade he’ll want more girls. At least I’ve narrowed the field knowing he has a gripe against you LM. Let me hear the message,” urged Kendal, wearing a proud new father look.

Jeff Arnold walked over to the small table near the wall. Reaching out he pushed a button on the answering machine. Kendal craned his neck closer so he didn’t miss a single word or sound. He didn’t really care to listen to the actual message he wanted to hear any background noise.

The voice sounded slightly muffled like the person talked through a rag.

“I’ve a message for Jeff Arnold. If you don’t want blood on your hands, pay me 200,000 dollars. You will come alone to the lighthouse at point Nepean road. Next time I call you will be home. If you don’t do what I say, Sam, her friend Tegan and the woman will be delivered overseas into a nice harem where the three women will never be seen or heard of again.”

When the phone went dead Crystal resumed sobbing.

Kendal replayed the message over three more times so Claire could hear what all the fuss was about. Kendal faced Myriad wearing a totally uninterested look. “You’re supposed to be a medium, what do you think?”

She responded by the way of a quick shrug of her shoulder.

“Could you please give permission to have Sam stay in your house for a few days?” asked LM. “I’m positive Crystal will feel a lot happier.”

“Why doesn’t Crystal stay too?” suggested Kendal. He faced LM’s wife and gave her a sympathetic grin. “I’m sure Marg, my wife will be pleased. Not to mention my mother-in-law. Thinking of the fact, having someone else in the house will give the old woman something to think about other than me.”

“You were the one who saved the old dear. Let me remind you it happened to be your idea to have her stay,” giggled Claire.

“I know I must have felt sorry for her for. I’m blaming it all on Patrick.”

LM joined in on the chuckle. “Detective, I want to thank you for your hospitality.” The gentle giant took his wife by the hand. “Crystal, I think staying with Detective Kendal’s wife might be the best thing to do until this mess is sorted. I’m sure it won’t take too long.”

“How does this mess concern us? Sam is home safe.”

“The message is aimed at this family. I believe I need to help the police catch this person. I feel it’s my duty. Once he’s caught, Sam and the other girls will stay safe.”

Kendal looked at Claire. “Let’s take a walk in the fresh air.” He started for the back door. “Myriad, I want to talk to my partner, alone.”

Myriad pouted and sat on the nearest chair watching Kendal walk towards the back fence.

“What’s up?”

“It’s what LM said to Crystal. Keep an open mind while I run the idea past you. Why didn’t I receive a phone call over a ransom? The kidnapper only left LM a message ordering him to pay.”

“Good point.”

“Let me re-work the question. The ransom message was directed solely at LM. If the kidnapper only wants money from him why were you and Tegan kidnapped?”

“I haven’t thought so far ahead.”

“If Sam happened to be the target in all of this, why were you and Tegan kidnapped?”

“Do you want to let me in on a few answers?”

“There has to be more to all this than what appears to be happening?”

“Human slave trading?” questioned Claire.

“I’m not convinced it’s the motive.”

“Do you have any concrete evidence to back up your thoughts?”

“Not really. I’m stuck on the idea the kidnapper wanted Sam out of the way for some reason other than making money on slave trading.”

“I guess time will tell us,” gushed Claire.

Kendal hoisted his mobile phone from his pocket. He looked at Claire while waiting for the call to go through. “Let’s hope this mystery comes to a satisfactory end.”

A young girl’s voice broke through the airwaves.

“Tegan, it’s dad, I need you to think carefully. When you were kidnapped by the hooded man did you say anything which may have tipped him off about you being a cop’s daughter or Claire being a detective?”

“Am I in trouble?”

“On the contrary, nothing could be further from the truth. There’s been a ransom message. I need to clarify this point to eliminate one of the ideas roaming through my head.”

Silence marred the connection for several seconds. “Dad, I’m positive I said nothing. I never broke cover and neither did Sam.”

“Thanks,” replied Kendal, hanging up the phone. “Claire, you’re right. Time will tell if the road we’re about to follow is the correct one?”

“LM has a wonderful plan he wants to throw on the table,” blurted Myriad the moment Kendal and Claire re-entered the house.

Kendal gave Myriad a cursory glance before walking back into the lounge. The moment LM saw both detectives returning he stopped pacing the floor.

“I’ve thought up a plan,” he started. “I’ll be here waiting for the phone call. I’ll get the money and meet this bloke. Detective Kendal, if you could be my shadow when I drop off the money, I’m sure the man will be caught.”

“I’ll agree only if there’s a minor change,” advised Kendal.

“What sort of change?”

“Forget the money. You’ll enter the bank as if the man is watching your every move. Go through the motions of filling out a withdrawal slip, walk to the teller window, pretending to be collecting the money. I’ll talk to the bank to tell them of our little scam. The girl will appear to place the money in whatever the kidnapper says and we’ll rendezvous at the lighthouse. It

sounds to me he has a vendetta against you. Do you have any idea who hates you enough to kidnap your daughter?"

"No, I don't. It could be anyone."

"Think harder Mr. Arnold. Maybe it might be a colleague at work? Someone you've rubbed the wrong way and might be seeking revenge?"

"I'm certain it's not the case."

"Did you accidentally jump in front of another truckie so you could be given a job?"

"Like I said before if I did I'm not aware of it."

Kendal slapped the big man on the shoulder. "Fair enough. If you can think of anyone, let me know?"

"I will."

"Tell me something; is it true an interstate truckie can obtain anything when he's on the road?"

"It's a fact. You can buy anything, from illegal substances, all the way up the line, to a puppy for a child on her birthday."

"What about teenage girls for slave trading? Young females being abducted and sold on the black market for sex slaves might net someone big buckets of money."

"I'm not sure where your questions are going."

"Don't you?"

"No."

"You just confessed a truckie can obtain anything."

"True. If I ever heard of girls being sold into the sex trade I'd run over the person who instigated the whole dirty business."

Kendal stared into the eyes of the man.

"Surely you don't believe I'd want my only daughter to be a sex slave?"

"The thought never entered my mind."

"If it did I'd have belted you over the head using an iron bar."

"It's not your daughter I'm considering."

"Look, detective, I want this mongrel caught even more than you do. I'm here to help in any way I can. If we catch this bloke behind the kidnappings a lot of potential young ladies out there will have a good safe life. Women should always be treated using a high degree of respect."

"Good to hear." Kendal decided to file the scene in the back of his mind. Not too deep so he'd forget the man's words. He knew time will surface the real culprit."

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

KENDAL EXPLAINED his plan to the manager of the bank who quickly decided to give his full support behind the idea. Kendal watched Claire watching the neighbourhood when the

phone rang. Listening Man jumped to his feet. He lifted the phone to his ear before it rang three times.

“Hello,” said Arnold.

“Listen up. Today at 4:00 pm you will enter the bank. You will withdraw 200,000 dollars from your account. You will proceed across the bay in a fast boat. At exactly 5:00 pm you will march along the dirt track to the lighthouse at Point Nepean, open the door, walk in and drop the money at the base of the stairs.”

“What happens if the door is locked?”

“Shut up and listen. The door will be unlocked. You will see a note on the inside of the door telling you where Sam is located.”

The phone went dead.

“There isn’t a lot of time,” whispered LM, checking his watch “We have to go.”

“Hold it a moment,” insisted Kendal. “Something’s wrong here.”

“What could be wrong? The instructions were clear to me.”

Kendal urged Claire to listen to the tape recording three more times. Looking at her blank expression he continued.

“I’m not sure if I should agree to the plan. Something doesn’t add up, I just can’t put my finger on it. I think the plan needs thorough scrutinizing.”

“Sugar, the plan is exactly what we need,” advised Claire.

Kendal paced the floor shaking his head. Marching across the room to the tape recorder, he played the message one more time. He looked up at Claire. His eyes gave away his excitement.

“What?”

“In all the crime movies I’ve watched, the kidnapper always says, make sure you come alone. Don’t call the police.”

“Sugar, this is no movie.”

“I know. In the movies, the kidnapper always stresses no cops are to be informed.”

“So?”

“This bloke didn’t say the fact. It’s as though he wants us there.”

LM stepped forward. “Detective, I think you’re searching for something which isn’t there. If you’re right; why does the kidnapper want the cops at the lighthouse? Surely he’s not dumb enough to think he won’t be caught.”

Kendal shrugged. “I don’t know. LM, maybe it’s not you or Sam the kidnapper is after.”

“Are you thinking it is Crystal?” asked Claire.

Kendal phoned his home. He walked the floor waiting for someone to answer. Eventually, he heard a woman’s voice. “Marg, I need to talk to Crystal.”

In a few short seconds, a scared female’s voice came through the phone.

“It’s me, Crystal. Detective Kendal, is there a problem?”

“I’m not sure. Do you know of anyone who hates you?”

“No, I don’t. I sure hope there isn’t.”

“Please, think fast, we don’t have too much time.”

“No one I can think of, though I’ve probably broken every man’s heart in Riddles Creek. I’ve known them all since school.”

“Was there anyone in particular?”

“No, not really. The young men came and went. I began to get fussy in which bloke I dated. My diary happened to be full of names and phone numbers.”

“If you can think back to someone who might have a gripe against you, please let me know.”

“I will,” said Crystal.

“At last, we might have a good solid lead,” hinted Kendal.

“Do tell, Sugar.”

“LM, before you and Crystal started dating do you remember who she happened to be dating at the time?”

“My little lady happened to be seeing everyone in Riddles Creek. Back then she was quite the catch. She still is.”

“So there wasn’t anyone in particular?” asked Kendal.

“Come to mention it I do remember a seventeen-year-old bloke. I drove into town from being on the road for three weeks. I sat at a table at the local pub having a quiet drink when he walked in drunk off his face. He told me lies about the times he dated Crystal. I confronted the man. He told me to bugger off. I went looking for him after I’d downed a few beers. I found him slumped behind the steering wheel of a paddock car.”

“What did you say to the man?” quizzed Claire.

“Nothin’. I reckon he was too drunk to even know he’d driven the old beat up Ute headlong into a tree. On his dying breath, he told me he made up the stories. He confessed he wanted to date Crystal. She refused due to the fact he’d been too young.”

“Jeff thanks for your honesty,” blurted Kendal. “It’s time to go to the bank.”

Opening the front door, Kendal spied a black envelope.

“Who’d place a black envelope in my security door?” scoffed LM.

“It’s for me,” confessed Kendal, sheepishly. Ripping open the envelope, he read the note. “If you need a hand I’m available. I’ll be loitering around in the main street.” Kendal slipped the note into his pocket. “What a bloke. I could swear he’s a good guy.”

“I’m not following what you’re saying,” hinted LM. “The bloke does sound genuine,” he added.

“It’s a long interesting story.” Out of the blue Kendal blurted. “I’ve an idea.” He walked outside, lifting his mobile phone to his ear. He silently counted the rings, waiting for someone to answer. He didn’t have to wait long before a confident voice came through the earpiece.

“I’ve been waiting for your call.” The voice chuckled. “I didn’t even have enough time to finish my Scotch on the rocks.”

“If I were to guess I’d say you’re sitting in the local pub?”

“Of course. I’m leaning against the wall at the rear table smiling at the young female waitress walking my way. I’ve ordered three coffees. If you’re here in five minutes the drink will still be hot.”

“We’re on our way.” Kendal faced the man staring at him. “LM, you’ll go to the bank as planned. We’ll meet you in the pub after you’ve withdrawn the bogus dollars.”

LM gave a sharp nod. “Right, I’m off.”

Kendal looked at the house and spied Claire watching him. He signaled for her to follow.

“We’re leaving?”

“We have a coffee waiting for us at the local,” stated Kendal.

The barman glanced up at the two detectives when they entered the local pub. He watched them walk straight for the back table. Two ladies and a rough looking male were seated close to the window. They were talking quietly, watching the cars go by. A man in a wide-brimmed hat glanced their way.

Kendal slid onto the seat. Claire slipped next to him.

“The coffee arrived at the table ten seconds before you arrived,” said GP.

“Good timing,” informed Claire.

The man reached across the table, took her right hand and kissed her knuckles.

“GP, I’m in need of your assistance.”

“Fancy a cop wanting my help? The sentence has a usual ring to it.”

“Are you sure you’re a hood?” growled Kendal, eyeballing the man.

“You already know the answer.”

“You don’t act like it.”

“Each to his own.”

“The rule you live by in not showing your face is outdated don’t you think?”

“I’ll sleep on it. What’s the plan?” asked GP, keeping his head bent.

“I need you to deliver a bag of fake money,” whispered Kendal.

“Don’t you think I should go along? Seeing how this is a police operation. I think Hughes mightn’t like the idea an alleged hood is the center of an important police operation,” whispered Claire.

“You have a valid point.”

“Can I ask why me, or is it confidential?” questioned GP.

“You and Listening Man are about the same height.”

“Fair comment.”

“There won’t be any more than two hundred dollars in the bag. The rest will be kids play money.”

“For a cop, you surprise me all the time. I love the plan.”

“I need you and Claire to deliver the money to the lighthouse across the bay.”

“Only on an interesting level, where will you be?” asked GP.

“I’ll be waiting for the kidnapper to show his face. I’ve a hunch the man is after Crystal.”

“The whole delivery could be a trap; A very explosive trap.”

“Be on your guard at all times. I don’t want to lose you.”

“You’re so comforting.”

“Now for the next part of the plan. I think Claire and I should talk to some of the men in this town.” Kendal downed the hot brew before standing. “Thanks for the coffee.”

“Anytime. I’ll be waiting in a fast boat,” admitted GP.

Both men pressed the flesh before going their separate ways.

Kendal and Clair approached the bar and sat on the leather stools. The barman stopped his cleaning and walked over.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“I’d like to talk to you about Crystal, Jeff Arnold’s wife.”

“Who’s asking?”

“I’m Detective Kendal, this woman is Detective Ambroso.”

“Crystal’s husband likes to be called LM.”

“Yes, he told me.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Can you think of anyone in this town who might be out to hurt Crystal?”

The man snorted and went back to cleaning the wooden bar top. He gave an uninterested stare.

“Did I hit a raw nerve or open an old wound?” asked Kendal.

“An old wound.”

“Care to explain?” quizzed Claire.

“I reckon the woman has broken every man’s heart in this town.”

“What about you?”

“I joined the growing queue of men. Don’t get me wrong, I did feel upset for a few months. One morning I convinced myself I probably won’t be the last. I discovered by the end of the week she’d broken the heart of three more blokes. I moved on.”

“So you met another woman and lived happily ever after?” asked Claire.

“Something along those lines.”

“Feel free to fill in the timeline,” hinted Kendal.

“I’d prefer not to.”

“I think you should clear the air.”

The tall athletic built man shrugged. “The woman I married was more intelligent than Crystal. She was the love of my life.”

“Was?” quizzed Claire.

“She died of cancer a few years back.”

“You’ve been a barman ever since?”

“No, only for the past six months. I promised my wife to see the world. I’ve been back in Australia for six months. When I save up enough money I’ll be off again.”

“You never re-married?” asked Claire.

“I will one day if I meet the right lady.” The man grinned at Claire before leaning on the bar.

“Being single I’m always looking for a no strings attached date,” hinted Claire.

The barman raised his hands. “I never date a cop.”

“Let’s talk about Crystal,” urged Kendal.

The man placed his cleaning cloth at the side. “In her teens, Crystal had been a flirt.”

“I’m surprised,” scoffed Claire. “She comes across to be the quiet, extremely shy type.”

“After the years drifted by she mellowed.”

“Do you know of anyone who might be out to hurt her?”

“You’ve already asked that question.”

“You failed to answer it.”

“It depends on what you mean?”

“Kidnap one of her children?”

“I can vouch for every man in this town.”

“Are you sure?” asked Kendal.

“Yes. Talk to any bloke, we all love Crystal in our own way. Everyone in Riddles Creek will help her in any way they can at a drop of a hat.”

“Are you certain?” quizzed Claire.

The man chuckled, swiped the cloth from the side and threw it into the sink directly behind him. “Years ago Crystal was involved in a car accident. She broke her hip. It’s the reason why LM looks after her so well. When the rest of the men stepped back, LM stepped forward. They fell in love.”

“What about you?” Kendal asked.

“I felt content to watch the couple fall in love. I happened to be the best man at their wedding.”

“Weren’t you jealous?”

“Not really. Crystal made her choice.”

“Is there a hidden meaning behind your statement?”

“None at all. She picked LM to be her husband. Every bachelor in the town moved on to the next young lady.”

“If I asked any man in Riddles Creek do you think they’d agree on your idea?”

“Wholeheartedly. If there’s nothing else I have to take the delivery which has just turned up.”

Kendal marched out of the local pub. Claire quickly followed.

“Walk with me a minute,” he said.

“Gladly.” Slipping her arm through his, she giggled. “Why don’t you take me in your arms and whisk me off to a room?”

Kendal froze, staring at his partner.

“Don’t tell me you finally decided to take me in your arms?”

“No.”

Claire took on a look of a broken hearted woman. Kendal kept up his stare.

“If you haven’t the nerve to take me, say what’s on your mind? It’s definitely not love.”

“If I was a man?” he started.

Claire grinned, interrupting his thoughts. “If you were man enough you’d take me right now.”

Kendal ignored her playful taunt. For only a split second he pondered how she’d react if he actually played along with her fantasy idea? “If I was a man nursing a broken heart, it’ll take a lot of soul, searching to stay in the town, watching the woman I loved walking around married to another man. The idea of watching from the wings as she raised a child will upset me no end.”

“What are you driving at?” whispered Claire.

“Someone in this town has taken a broken heart to the next level.”

“If you’re right, why kidnap a teenage girl? It’s no way to win back a woman’s heart. If it happened to me I’d tell him where to get off.”

“What if you didn’t know and you never found out? The man who loves you could turn the whole thing around and frame someone else. Or better still, if the plan didn’t work, murder Jeff Arnold. He could easily slip into Crystal’s life and she’d never be the wiser.”

“I’d want to murder the bloke if I discovered the plot.”

“A good point,” said Kendal. “What if you never did and you fell in love with the alleged plotter?”

“I suppose I’d probably die a happy woman, provided nobody knew.”

“If LM happened to be out of the picture and Sam was or wasn’t rescued by our jealous kidnapper not much will stand in the way of Crystal and the man getting back together.”

“If Sam was never heard of again more than likely Crystal will be a devastated woman. The kidnapper could easily pour out sympathy helping her to fall into his trap.” Claire gave Kendal a startled look. “No matter how ingenious the plot is it’ll be hard to prove.”

“You’ve got it in one. I think it’s time to visit the library.”

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

KENDAL FLASHED his police badge at the librarian when she met them at the door. The woman looked middle aged. She dressed conservatively in a modest light brown knee-length skirt and cream shirt. Reading glasses hanging from her neck made her look like an intelligent woman.

“I’m Ms. Donna Ditchfield; may I help you, Detectives?”

“My partner, detective Claire Ambroso and I were walking past this well equipped modern public library of yours when a thought came to mind. Can you recollect any details of a car accident some years back involving Crystal Arnold?”

“Yes, indeed I can. I saw the whole thing from the school window.”

“You were a school student when the incident happened?” questioned Kendal.

“Yes. At the time I got to thinking along the line of a career in teaching. After a year of travelling the world, I lost interest. I fell into the library job.”

“Getting back to the accident, can you tell me any details?” asked Kendal, trying to keep the juices of the woman’s story flowing.

“The room we were in happened to be a portable classroom at the back of the oval. We were supposed to be learning how to sew. The teacher stepped out for a breath of fresh air.”

“A smoke?” questioned Claire.

“And a drink. She was an alcoholic. I caught her many times lighting the end of a cigar and holding a whisky bottle under her arm. I used to tell her I’d go inform the principle unless she gave me a few privileges.”

“Such as?” Kendal asked.

“Like an, ‘A minus.’”

“The teacher agreed to your demands?” asked Claire.

The woman nodded. “I also successfully conned her into giving me regular Bourbon and Coke. I have to confess the alcohol tasted disgraceful. Back then I loved Scotch on the rocks so I gave the boys licking up my shadow the Bourbon. When the occasional cigar or two found

their way into my hands I gave those to the boys too. They repaid me in love.” She sighed. “Those were the days.”

“Where’s the teacher now?” asked Kendal.

“Miss Stonemaker died of a heart attack not long after the accident.”

“Is it still possible for you to give us an accurate account of the accident?” questioned Kendal.

“I sure can. I still have the occasional nightmare. Crystal and I have been best friends since we were born. She sat next to me on that particular day. Jeff Arnold came to the school in his beat up old rusty Ute. The local cops used to turn a blind eye to it. All they ever asked of him was to make sure the brakes and the steering were good.”

“Were they?”

“I’m not mechanically minded so I’d have to guess they were. On the day of the accident, Crystal whispered in my ear after Miss Stonemaker has called the class role I’m going to meet LM on the oval. She felt confident if I remained quiet she’d never be caught.”

“Did Stonemaker discover the plot?” asked Claire.

“Let me say this, it’s not in my nature to DOB in a friend. Stonemaker was too busy throwing up in the loo to know what Crystal planned.”

Kendal shook his head at their shenanigans, as his ‘mother-in-law put it.’

“Crystal winked at me before jumping out of the window. I watched her sprint across the oval, wrap her arms around LM’s neck and give him a mighty long kiss. Swallowing my bout of jealousy was like swallowing a rough brick a chunk at a time. I happened to be seeing Jeff behind Crystal’s back. I have to confess she never knew it. Come to think of it, I think she still doesn’t know. He used to call me ‘DD.’ LM broke off our short fling to devote more of his time to Crystal. After their kiss, they seemed to be locked in an argument. Crystal shoved her hands into his pockets, pulling out the keys to his car. He grabbed her by the wrists looking determined not to let her go. She struggled like a wounded bull trying to pull away. To stop her struggles he wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her again. I thought I saw someone approach the car, carrying pliers. When he reached the car I lost sight of him. At that exact moment, Miss Stonemaker entered the room, yelling at me to look directly at her. A full minute ticked off before I could glance out the window again.”

“Did you say anything to your teacher?” asked Kendal.

“Like what, Crystal jumped out the window? My lips were sewn shut. The only thing I could do was to wait for Stonemaker to turn her back.”

“Did she?” asked Claire.

“Yes, and the second she did, I slipped out of the room via the window. I didn’t take the time to see if anyone else in the class saw me go, I just wanted to get outside before the teacher saw. By the time I ran across the oval Crystal had driven off. I grabbed hold of Jeff Arnold’s arm, telling him what I thought I saw. I’ll never forget his face. It looked the same colour of my mother’s white starched bed sheets. He said he received a death threat. Someone hand delivered the note, placing it on the seat of his Ute. He again yelled at Crystal to stop the car. She either didn’t hear or she completely ignored him. I’ve never seen a man run so fast in my entire life. He nearly caught up to the car.”

“So Crystal sat behind the wheel of a car which may or may not have been vandalized?” queried Kendal.

The woman nodded. “The car failed to take a bend on the road because of the puddle of oil right on the bend. Crystal fished tailed the car, lost control, smashing sideways into a pole. For Crystal to still be alive, the police told me they put it down to good driving. If she had hit the tree head on Crystal would have died.”

“The person who tampered with the car obviously targeted Jeff Arnold and not Crystal,” protested Kendal. “Is there anything else you can add?”

“No, I think we’ve covered everything.”

“Surely the accident got a mention in the local newspaper.”

The woman dived onto the keyboard of the main computer. In a few seconds, she brought up the archive file. She typed in the exact date which brought forward the local newspaper.

Kendal and Claire sat at the computer, reading the article.

After reading the last paragraph, Kendal didn’t have a doubt the whole vandalism theory was one hundred percent correct. He also noted several important details were excluded from the article.

“The picture of the Ute helps to make it look solid,” hinted Kendal in Claire’s ear when they stepped from the library.

“Maybe the woman’s story has merit? It sure sounded interesting,” Claire answered. “It’s not every day one has a chance to meet an eyewitness who can remember every small detail, especially after such a long a time.”

“Let’s stroll around the town. We might get lucky and land ourselves a nice fat juicy lead,” whispered Kendal, pointing at the local garage. “That looks like a nice place to start?”

The middle-aged grease monkey was lying face up on a narrow dirty red vinyl trolley under the front end of a car; a 1932 metallic blue hot rod when the two detectives walked in.

“Giddyay, we’re looking for the owner of this establishment?” quizzed Kendal.

The man slid from under the car, staring at the two looking down at him. “You’d have to be either, cops, or you’re lost.”

“Right the first time,” advised Claire. “Can we ask you a few questions?”

“No. I’m busy.” The man slid back underneath the car and began swearing at the over tightened nut he tried to loosen.

“Sir, this won’t take long. I’m Detective Kendal; this woman is my partner, Detective Ambroso. It’s imperative you give us a few minutes of your time.”

The man pushed the trolley out from under the car and grabbed hold of the fender. He stood to full height.

“I’m Karl Haverbrack, the owner of this small business. I have six cars to fix today. This old beauty has given me nothing except trouble for the past three weeks. To find the time to ready my car for the hot rod show next weekend I’m working from sun up to sun down. I’m up for a prize if I can find the time to get her back on the road. Please, state your business so I can get back to work.”

“What’s wrong with the car?”

“I know you didn’t interrupt me to find out the answer. If you must know, my car had a cracked head. Just when I thought all’s well she developed a leaking sump. I picked up a stone early today on the way here.”

“It must have been some stone.”

“More like a rock. Kids these days throw them on the road for kicks.”

“Is there a more comfortable place we can have a chat other than your workshop?” asked Kendal.

“Sure there is. My office is in the corner. I need to order a gasket for the sump. I’ll put the kettle on; we can talk over a cup of coffee.”

The man wasted no time finding three clean empty mugs and poured the coffees.

Kendal stood at attention facing the man. He looked to be somewhat shorter. A bald patch on the top of his head shone in the overhead light. The office smelt like the workshop and looked the same.

“Sorry about the mess, the cleaning lady is running late.” The man raised an eyebrow. “I’m yanking your chain detective. I’m joking.”

“I’m not interested in your dry wit. I’m interested in finding out if you knew Mrs. Crystal Arnold?”

“Sure I know Crystal. Everyone in this town knows her.”

“We have inside knowledge Crystal and you were in love. It’s possible you still are?”

“I’m not sure where you dug the info up from. Be advised it’s not quite right. In my teens, I’d been in love with Crystal. She broke my heart when she refused to marry me. If your visit is riding on the back of the accident you have wasted both our time. I moved on years ago.”

“So you can’t tell us any new information on the accident?” asked Kendal.

“Who put you up to this?”

“Please answer the question,” ordered Claire.

“I can’t help you.”

“You can’t or you won’t?” questioned Kendal.

“I loved the woman,” confessed Haverbrack, placing three mugs full of coffee on the dirty table. “I went out of my way one night to get all dressed up. The drive-in was showing a chick flick. The moment interval began I summoned up enough will power to propose. She turned me down. I reckon Crystal and I could’ve made a great life together. I’d have done anything for the woman.”

“Can you tell me about the accident?”

“Between Crystal and the tree?”

“Yes.”

“What’s there to tell? She lost the tree won.”

“I’ve read the article in the local paper about the details. I’m hoping you might be able to complete any loose ends.”

“About the so called man who cut the brake line just before the accident?”

“Yes. Can you enlighten me?”

“It’s all a cruel fictitious story. Don’t believe a word of it.”

“What do you believe is the real story?” asked Kendal.

“LM did it himself.”

“Did what?”

“He tampered with his own car. The woman who runs the library, Donna and Arnold concocted the whole story about a man sneaking up to the car just so Crystal might marry him. LM was to drive off. When he ran into the oil spill which he himself placed in the middle of the road on the first bend, he was to broadside the car to wreck the tail end. Crystal would run towards him screaming. He’d fake a few injuries, she’d feel sorry for the bugger and they’d wed. Like I’ve already stated, it had been an almost perfect plan. I couldn’t have planned the con even if I tried.”

“If what you say is correct, the plan backfired. Crystal could have been killed.”

“Yes, she almost bought the farm. Apparently, she grabbed the keys to LM’s Ute. She drove off before he could stop her. A big man like LM not being able to stop a young petite lady from grabbing the keys or not being able to run fast enough? Come on detective, I wasn’t born under a cabbage leaf. I mightn’t be the most intelligent male in this town; I reckon the whole story’s a scam from the first letter to the last. What do you think? Before you answer me let me tell you something I’ve never mentioned to anyone. The oil puddle on the road guaranteed Crystal will lose control of the car on the bend. The only thing she needed to do was to hang on. The car should’ve hit the tree bum first. I took measurements. There’s one more fact you’ll never uncover. The oil in the puddle happened to be brand spanking new.”

“I take it you have no proof?” hinted Kendal hiding the disappointment in his voice.

The man’s grin widened. “I sure do. Just like everyone else, you won’t believe it.”

“Try me?”

“Step this way.”

Karl Haverbrack led the way to the rear corner of the garage. It appeared to be the most dingiest lit area of the garage where cobwebs reigned supreme. Haverbrack stepped up to and opened a small drawer belonging to a dilapidated wooden chest. Rare spares and rags were roughly boxed and stacked haphazardly on the oil-soaked wooden top. Several different colours of paint coated the sides of old paint tins which were placed on top of the boxes. The few exposed areas of the wooden top revealed the wood was used to make a grand Tasmanian oak desk. Karl yanked out an old jar wrapped in plastic from the rear of the drawer and thrust it at Kendal.

“In the jar is a sample of the oil which someone poured onto the road,” chirped Karl Haverbrack.

“The evidence isn’t much good, it’s all dried up,” jeered Kendal.

“It has, yes. If you look closely at the whole shallow pool you’ll notice it’s clear. There are no contaminants in it. If it happened to be old oil the colour would’ve been black.”

“I have to admit the oil is clear. I still can’t use the jar for evidence.”

“I know.”

“If it’s the only evidence you have to back up your theory, a quarter filled jar of alleged clean oil which has been dried for years is inadmissible.”

“No, it’s not all the evidence I have. The grand prize is under the tarp you’re leaning on.”

Kendal stood watching Karl grabbed hold of the heavy dust soaked tarp and drag it off a rusting Ute.

“This is the Ute Crystal drove the day of the accident. I towed it here in my father’s tow truck. This business belonged to him. When he passed away ten years ago I took over.”

“Why did you keep the Ute?”

“It’s like you said, I loved the girl. If I couldn’t marry her, I thought maybe one day the truth might come out. If it did I might be given a second chance to win her heart. I lost the pipe dream when the years rolled away. I just couldn’t bear to see the old Ute in the wrecking yard. It eventually became part of this place.”

Kendal glanced over the wreck. His fingers glided over the twisted metal where the Ute smacked the tree.

“If you want to see the second part of the evidence, you’ll have to slide underneath.”

Kendal copied Karl’s squat and followed the man under the rear axle. Behind the wheel, he saw the old brake hose. Small cuts were evident from old age.

“If you follow the brake line towards the front of the car, about two feet from the wheel you can plainly see the line has been almost severed through,” advised Karl.

“Yes, I can see what you’re talking about,” admitted Kendal. “The line has definitely been cut.”

“The way I see things, if someone slid under the Ute to cut the line he’d have a heck of a job reaching so far in. If it weren’t for the stands the car is sitting on you’d see the Ute had been lowered. Even if someone used long pliers at arm’s length the cut is too far in. To put the icing on my theory, I went to the school to look out of the same window Donna said she looked out of. I discovered the person in question would’ve needed to come from this side of the car. To sum up, LM, Crystal and Donna should have been able to see the man. Hence, in my detective work, the brake line must have been cut at the house where LM lived. I conclude he did it himself.”

“Why hurt the woman he supposedly loves?” questioned Claire.

“Like I’ve already stated, Crystal wasn’t supposed to be driving the car. LM fakes being hurt. Crystal pours out sympathy on him like rust on an old car. The man and she fall in love. They get married. LM changes his plans and acts how he wanted Crystal to act.”

“Thank you for giving up your valuable time,” said Kendal. He shook Karl’s hand and walked out of the garage. “I think a few more stops around the traps might be what we need to help clear the jigsaw puzzle of this case,” he mentioned to Claire.

“Surely you don’t believe a word the bloke told us?” questioned Claire.

“Truth is stranger than fiction.”

“The Ute could have been vandalized by anyone at anytime. To put it into two words; he’s lying. The remainder of the story he spun has no bearing on the case.”

“You’re exactly right.” Kendal checked his watch. “We still have time. Let’s go for a walk to see what the wind whips up.”

“Sugar, the area is so quiet it resembles a ghost town,” hinted Claire catching him up. “Finding anyone else might prove difficult.”

A man wearing a black pinstriped two piece suit made a bee-line for the two detectives.

“I’d never risk my life on your statement as being too correct,” informed Kendal, staring at the man.

“I’ve been keeping my eye on you two,” confessed the well-dressed man. Stepping into their paths he extended his hand. “I’m Doctor Jereme Wootten.”

Kendal looked the man in the eyes. He greeted him by extending his hand. They pressed the flesh.

“At a guess, I’d have to say you are both detectives and should talk to me. If you’re not, I apologize for interrupting your walk and have a good day.”

“I’m Detective Kendal. The woman you’re looking at is Detective Ambroso.”

“Good, I’m ecstatic I’m talking to the right people.”

“What subject did you want to talk about?” asked Claire.

“It depends on what you’re searching for?”

“You approached us,” said Kendal.

“Quite right I did. Shall we walk across the street and enter my doctor’s surgery.”

“Lead on,” urged Kendal.

The interior lights of the surgery were switched on. Kendal and Claire were shown seats in a small room full of medical books.

“You have no patients today, Doctor?” quizzed Claire.

“Not yet. In about an hour my receptionist will be here to get things set up. My first patient isn’t due to arrive for an hour and a half.” Wootten chuckled sharply. “Mrs. Cleanen is my first appointment this afternoon. She always arrives early by a good half hour.”

“Doctor Wootten, your time, and mine are precious, I think we should start our chat?” urged Kendal.

“I wholeheartedly agree.” Wootten opened a small drawer, extracting a black folder full of A4 size paper on the desk. The folder measured about 25mm thick. He looked at Kendal. “Due to the confidentiality clause I can’t actually show you the contents of this folder; however I can inform you of matters which might concern the police.”

“Who does the folder belong to?” asked Claire.

“I can’t volunteer the name. You have to guess.”

“Doctor Wootten, I don’t have time for games,” jeered Kendal.

“I can assure you this is no game.”

“Let me throw a dart at the bull’s eye,” barked Kendal. “We’re searching for information on Crystal Arnold, can you help?”

Wootten pushed the folder closer to Kendal.

“I take it we’re talking about the same subject?”

“We are.”

“Let me have another throw. The folder in front of me is her entire medical records?”

Wootten nodded before placing the folder back in the draw.

“What can you tell us about Crystal?” asked Claire, pulling her chair closer to the desk.

“You ask the questions and I’ll answer.”

Kendal started. “Interesting subject.”

“I thought it might tease your taste buds.”

“How long have you known Crystal?”

“Let me answer your question this way. We were in the same class at school.”

“Which year are you talking about?”

“Every year since grade one.”

“Interesting,” mumbled Kendal. “Were you in the same classroom at the time of the accident?”

“Which accident are you referring to? There were several over a couple of years.”

“The one I’m interested in is when Crystal jumped out of the classroom through the open window. There has been an alleged report the Ute she happened to be driving didn’t have brakes. Someone cut the line.”

“Yes. I watched Crystal jump out of the window. I witnessed the whole thing.”

“Did you happen to spot anyone near the car just before Crystal drove the Ute?”

“No one cut the brake line.”

“We’ve been informed otherwise.”

“Who might make up such a story?”

“I’m not at liberty to say,” mumbled Kendal.

“You don’t have to say, I can have a great guess. Detectives, take my word as a Doctor, the story of someone tampering with the Ute was all fabricated.”

“You sound pretty sure of yourself,” said Claire.

“I am.”

“Let’s move on,” moaned Kendal. “Tell us your view.”

“It happened to be nothing more than an accident.”

“Did you love the woman?” blurted Kendal.

“Yes, I did, very much so.”

“On a scale of ten; the number ten being top, what number would you pick?”

Wootten looked surprised at the question. For several moments he fell silent. Kendal used the pause to study the man. He was a mystery, too hard to read. Whatever secrets he locked away inside his head were unreadable from the outside. Unless the man confessed them he’d take them to the grave.

“Detective, this might be hard to grasp so let me try to answer your question this way. Thirteen years ago I helped to deliver a baby. The tiny little girl was my first. I’ve delivered countless babies since the first one. The medical doctor on duty with me happened to be called away to an emergency over a man who’d cut his foot to the bone. The senior Doctor dragged me out of the delivery room, tapping me on the shoulder. He whispered in my ear, ‘Jereme Wootten if the baby comes when I’m gone act like you’re in complete control. Don’t show any nervousness and you’ll do fine.’ When he left I walked back into the delivery suite, smiling at the young lady. Patting her on the leg, I winged the whole thing. Everything moved along nicely. Handing the baby girl over to her mother I fought back my tears. She felt so grateful to me for doing a wonderful job she insisted on naming her baby after me. I advised her Jereme isn’t a girl’s name. She acted so upset I suggested my middle name.”

“Let me take another throw at the bulls-eye,” snarled Kendal. “Your full name is Jereme Sam Wootten?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Crystal is the mother?” quizzed Claire.

“Yes. She fell pregnant two years after marrying Jeff Arnold. I sat next to Crystal when the priest christened her baby, ‘Samantha;’ Sam for short. Crystal asked me to be her

Godfather. The baby should've been mine. When I handed the baby over I was lost in a fantasy of it being half mine where I married Crystal, not LM."

"Does Crystal know any of this?"

"No, and she never will."

"I take it Crystal adopted you as her personal doctor?" hinted Kendal.

"She's been coming to see me ever since I was an intern and a long time before she married LM. Crystal even volunteered if I needed someone to help me study for my medical degree, she'd come running."

"All this is leading to what?" asked Kendal.

"If you want to point a finger at the accident you need look no further than her husband. He's no good for her and never will be."

"You sound like you're sitting on the jealous side," stated Claire.

"Call it what you like, I don't care."

"Why tell us your secret?" questioned Kendal.

"I want to clear the air; to vent my opinion about this stupid alleged fictitious story about someone vandalizing the Ute."

"To me, it sounds like you're still in love with Crystal," Kendal hinted.

"One hundred percent correct."

"It's some secret," blurted Kendal. "Do you love her enough to want Jeff Arnold out of the way so you can take over the role of husband?"

"I'd never want Sam to be sold into a harem. Anyone who does something so horrid should be placed in a padded cell."

"What makes you so sure Sam went missing? I never told it to anyone."

"Rumours spread fast in this town, Detective."

"If you look at it from my viewpoint, Doctor, all roads lead to you. Not only do you love Crystal, you'd do anything to have Jeff removed so you could marry the woman whom you have secretly loved your entire life."

"Detectives, our meeting has come to an abrupt end. I have held you from your duties for too long. There's the door."

Kendal and Claire walked out of the room simultaneously.

"Sugar, we've just finished a strange conversation."

"Yes. I felt like we were being lectured."

"Guilty or not?" quizzed Claire.

Kendal looked at his partner. "At this moment I'm not sure. My gut is telling me someone living in this town is trying to steer us away from the culprit."

"Maybe we're looking for more than one person," hinted Claire.

Looking sideways at her, Kendal's face changed to stone.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

AT 4:00pm LM stepped down from his car, looked up and down the road before proceeding to stroll across the street. The only person he saw was an elderly couple walking their small white dog along the shopping strip. They were engrossed in a conversation and holding hands. The couple didn't even notice the man marching towards the bank. Just like the elderly couple, LM failed to notice the man standing at a window of a weatherboard house directly opposite the bank. The curtains were parted only a tad. To the outside world, the watcher looked practically invisible. Even the young man who rounded the corner of a nearby street jogging past the white picket fence failed to see him.

The mysterious man watched LM walk into the bank. The act painted a smirk on the mystery man's face. He paid particular attention to the time LM entered the bank and how deserted the street looked. He studied each parked car. Every sedan looked to have its passenger wheels butting up against the curb. After glancing at the bank door he'd repeat his study, time and again. Satisfied there were no cops on stakeout he locked his gaze on the front door of the bank. Eventually, the stranger closed the curtain. However, he kept up his surveillance of the bank by looking through the last sliver where the curtain had been deliberately cut too narrow. If anyone stopped to study the window only an expert curtain maker could have picked out the flaw.

LM joined the tail end of the queue. Finally stepping up to the teller window he greeted the young lady.

The middle-aged woman seated at the next teller looked up. "Good afternoon LM; nice day," she stated battering her eyelashes.

"Giddy Gladys, is the manager in?"

The woman nodded before walking to a nearby office. She tapped her knuckles three times on the door. A man, the physique of a rake handle, stood and opened a solid wooden door, beckoning LM into the small room. The two men shook hands. The man closed and locked the door.

"LM, Detective Kendal has told me every detail of the plan. I must say it sounds pretty darn good."

"Chuck many thanks for keeping the lid on the whole thing. I can see it in Gladys' eyes she has no idea of what is about to go down."

"Good. If she ever found out the whole town will probably know simultaneously in minutes. The kidnapper might never be caught. Do the police have any idea on the identity of the culprit?"

"Not yet. If you could shed some light on the charade it could be a great help."

"Sorry, I've no idea. It could be anyone. Please don't take my information the wrong way, I too love Crystal. She's a great girl. The whole male population in this town loves her."

"I'm a very lucky man to be married to her."

"My only characteristic flaw is I don't think I could have stayed all those hours at the hospital like you did. Hardly any sleep for five days; I'd be a wreck. I'm not like you. Keep on going. Sleep can wait. I remember those were your exact words."

"I did manage to catch a few hours sleep."

"You're too modest," whispered Chuck.

“Thanks for the compliment. Is the money ready?”

“It sure is.” Chuck reached under the desk and produced a bulging soft black leather bag.

“I feel sorry for the pig,” blurted LM.

“Excuse me?”

“The pig. The bag is made of pig leather.”

Chuck shook his head. He removed the locks so he could unzip the top of the bag. LM spied bundles of fake money. The manager re-zipped it, handing the bag to LM. He locked the two flaps.

“If you happen to rescue the bag could I have it back? My wife gave it to me for my birthday a few years back. If she knew what it will be used for she might get upset. Pendulum mood swings are rampant at the moment.”

“I’ll take good care of it.” LM grabbed hold of the charcoal coloured handles. He shook Chuck’s hand before walking towards the door. Before leaving he faced Chuck. “Thanks again for having the bundles of money ready. They look authentic.”

“Whatever you do don’t remove the bottom pile. It’s a dye bomb. It might help to find the man in question if things go pear shaped.”

“Do the cops know of the dye bomb?”

“No, it’s my idea,” confessed Chuck.

“I’m not sure if Detective Kendal will approve of your idea.”

“I’m only trying to do my bit.” Chuck walked across the room and slapped LM on the left shoulder. “If you don’t tell them, they’ll never know.”

LM walked out of the bank. Marching to his car he roared off towards his home.

Kendal looked out the window of LM’s house waiting for Jeff to get back from the bank. The street appeared to be tomb quiet. A single black cloud shrouded the sun. The weather appeared to be deteriorating. How fast, he didn’t know. He spied LM’s car and watched it stop in the driveway. The moment LM stepped onto the verandah Kendal opened the front door.

“There’s a storm brewing,” mentioned LM walking into the house.

“Let’s pray the storm which is supposed to lash the city today has been delayed,” hinted Kendal. “How did you go at the bank?”

“Not a problem,” replied LM placing the bag on the floor.

A soft tapping noise came from down the hall. Both men jumped. Kendal pulled his gun from his shoulder holster. He squared himself to the figure standing directly underneath the down light before housing his gun back into his shoulder holster.

“When did you turn up?” asked LM.

Kendal folded his arms across his chest, waiting to hear the reply.

“Please, Jeff, don’t be too upset. I need to know what’s going on. You haven’t called.”

“Crystal, I’m surprised you escaped my home,” moaned Kendal.

“I have to confess it wasn’t easy. Sam and I planned the escape last night. I waited for everyone to be asleep before grabbing Sam’s mobile and sneaking out the back door. After climbing over the fence, I sprinted for the park where I called a taxi. When he eventually arrived I got him to drive me here.”

“Fascinating,” mentioned Kendal. “I’m amazed you actually got past my mother-in-law. Her ears never miss a word or the slightest noise. If she caught you I’d have heard her yelling from here.”

Crystal giggled. “She did catch me. I told her of my plans only after she threatened to raise hell on earth.”

“It sounds like her,” jeered Kendal over the sound of his mobile phone. He swiped it from his pocket on the second ring.

“Al, I thought you might want to know Crystal is headed your way. If I knew earlier I’d have rung ages ago,” moaned Marg, sounding alarmed.

“Thanks for the warning. She’s here.”

“I’m happy she made to Riddles Creek. While you’re on the phone, how’s it all panning out?”

“I’m hopeful of an arrest in the next few hours. I’ll keep you informed.” Kendal hung up the phone. “Crystal, did you notice anyone lurking in the shadows watching you when you arrived?”

“No.”

“So far so good.”

“Crystal, you shouldn’t have been walking about outside, it might be dangerous,” mentioned LM.

“Now you’re here you’ll have to stay in the house away from the windows,” instructed Kendal.

“I’ll feel like a prisoner in my own home.”

“It won’t be for long. I can sense something’s about to happen.”

A rustling of leaves outside the window caught Kendal by surprise. Crystal dropped to the floor. LM hugged the wall. Kendal looked through the slit between the closed curtain and the wall. Hearing a shuffling noise before something scraped the concrete path leading to the front door, Kendal slipped his hand inside his coat. Silently he extracted his police issue, Smith and Wesson.

The scraping noise came again. This time, it sounded close to the front door. Kendal slid along the wall quieter than a mouse searching for food scraps.

A shadow crossed the window then moved onto the solid wooden front door. Kendal could hear breathing. The noise sounded methodic and even.

When the door bell rang LM and Kendal jumped. Crystal slowly crawled under the coffee table.

“Detective Kendal, if you’re in the house don’t shoot, it’s me, Myriad.”

“What are you doing here?” questioned Kendal, opening the door.

“I’ve come to help.”

“I left you a note ordering you to stay away.”

“I’ve come to warn you.”

“About what?”

“My psychic powers have warned me something big is about to happen.” She checked her watch. “It’s supposed to happen in exactly one minute.”

“Have you any further details?”

“No, not yet. I think Crystal should quickly go into the main bedroom for her own safety.”

Crystal didn't question the statement and ran for the bedroom.

“Thank you for the warning,” sighed Kendal, staring directly at Myriad.

“The warning is for you, not Crystal.”

Kendal raised an eyebrow at the sound of a scuffle outside. He again walked across the room to the window. He looked out through the glass. After a quick glance at the garden, Kendal moved from the window and walked slowly down the hall towards the main bedroom. At the closed door, he paused long enough to hear a muffled whispered scream. He squared himself to the door, lifted his foot, kicking the door open. He darted to the side of the doorway, waiting for any verbal response.

None came.

Somehow trouble entered the house and was holding Crystal hostage. He looked at Myriad standing at the other end of the hall. Outraged at being lured into distraction he wanted to squeeze the life from her body. He'd been completely taken off guard. Myriad happened to be the decoy all along.

“I know you're in the hall, Detective Kendal. Come in and join the party.”

The deep familiar voice came from somewhere in the bedroom.

Crystal let go of a second muffled scream.

LM joined Kendal at the doorway.

“Give yourself up. Let Crystal go,” urged Kendal.

“I don't think so?”

“What's all this about?” Kendal pushed LM back down the hall away from any stray bullet the kidnapper might shoot.

“Give up,” yelled LM.

“Not likely. Why don't you step into the room so we can have a heart to heart chat?”

Kendal shook his head at LM. He called out to the kidnapper. “It's not going to happen.”

“Gentlemen, have a nice day.”

Kendal heard the sound of a gunshot, followed by glass shattering. He heard a thud then silence.

Squatting, Kendal stole a look into the room. Slithering along the carpeted floor he hid behind the bed where he sat listening for three seconds before sprinting for the window. Staring at the property he spied two figures running up the driveway. The taller of the two looked to be half dragging the other.

Kendal dived out of the window to begin the chase.

A bullet whizzed past his ears. He dived behind a medium sized tree. LM scurried through the window after Kendal. Both men hugged a tree when another bullet screamed past, embedding itself in the brickwork of LM's house.

A car's engine roared to life. Kendal ran into the middle of the road, waiting to see movement. A black panel van turned down the road away from the house. Kendal lifted his gun to eye level, took careful aim and fired two bullets as the car sped away. The first bullet smashed the back window. The second bullet embedded in the metal bumper bar slightly to the right of center.

Kendal started to run back to the house when he heard a truck's engine crank. The metal monster roared to life. Black smoke billowed from the dual exhaust pipes above the cabin. The smell of diesel filled the cool stagnant air. Kendal sprinted up the drive, jumped onto the truck's lowest step, throwing open the passenger door. He didn't wait for LM to invite him in before slipping onto the seat. By the time they reached the end of the street they heard a distinct thud-thud- thud. The prime mover lost speed before grinding to a stop.

"The kidnapper must have placed a nail under both front tyres," barked LM.

Kendal lifted his mobile phone from his pocket to tap ten numbers. A few seconds later a man's voice answered.

"GP, it's your turn. Crystal's been kidnapped. She's on the move."

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

BACK INSIDE the house Kendal and LM watched Claire check her snub nose revolver before replacing it in her ankle strap. She grabbed hold of the money bag when the front door bell chimed.

"My hot date has arrived. His timing is absolutely perfect. I do love punctuality in a man."

"Hot date?" questioned Kendal, noting her frown.

"Sugar, I'll be safe, don't worry."

The doorbell rang for the second time.

"If your date is at the door you shouldn't keep him or her waiting."

"You're a bundle of laughs," wheezed Claire scrunching her nose. She walked to the door and greeted GP. He stooped to kiss the knuckles of her right hand.

"Senioretta, it's a pleasure to see you again. It is time for us to go."

"I'm all yours, big man."

GP took hold of the black bag full of fake money, tipping his hat slightly at Kendal.

"Make sure you both stay alert. I'll catch you up at the lighthouse."

Claire gave her partner a school girl grin before waltzing out of the house.

"The trap is set," whispered Kendal looking directly at LM. "Hopefully, the kidnapper will be convinced he made a clean escape. From a distance let's hope the kidnapper can't tell you or GP apart."

"Where did you find that man?"

"It's a long story. You'd have a hard time believing me if I told you. Hell, I don't even believe it sometimes."

"Maybe one day after everything has subsided we can sit down for a meal at the local pub so you can tell your story."

"I might take you up on the idea. Maybe if GP decides to change his lifestyle, Claire, and the man might get married. He could be the only one who will ever be able to tame the woman."

GP might even ask you to be his best man. If it happened, what a laugh?” Kendal snorted at the idea before looking out of the window at the graveyard quiet street. “I only hope whatever happens today won’t end in disaster.”

The wind felt refreshing against Claire’s face as GP sat her at the back of the boat. Both took in the sights waiting for the rookie cop to gun the motor to its stop. The shoreline quickly faded behind them. Ahead, the Flinders lighthouse slowly grew larger. A low swell looked evident.

“Care for a small glass of wine?” asked GP.

Claire stared at the man sitting next to her. “Sure why not?”

GP extracted a pocket-size bottle from inside his coat and two shot glasses. Unscrewing the lid of the bottle he poured the white liquid. The contents of the tiny bottle only managed to fill half of the two glasses. Sliding the empty bottle back into his coat pocket he gave a glass to Claire.

“To the success of the con.”

“Here, here,” chanted Claire. She drank the liquid and held the glass in her lap. “I’ve a question.” The tone in her voice sounded serious.

“I’m listening.”

“I’ve come to the conclusion you’re not a thug. I want you to take off the hat. Let me see your face.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Why?”

“You forgot the rule I live by.”

“If someone sees your face and knows what you do for a living they die.”

“Exactly.”

“I’m willing to stake my life on the idea you’re not a thug.”

“So you want to see my face?”

“Correct.”

“You want me to break the only rule I’ve lived by all my adult life?”

“Yes.”

“Again I say it’s not a good idea.”

“I don’t believe you’d kill me. You don’t have it in you.”

“I’ve disposed of countless dozens of people. How can you say I couldn’t snuff out your life?”

Claire poked him in the shoulder. “Every time we see each other you kiss the back of my hand.”

“I’m only being friendly.”

“No, you’re not.”

“What do you call it?”

“You love me,” blurted Claire.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“How do you figure?”

“Woman’s intuition!”

GP snorted a laugh. He collected the two glasses and hid them in his coat pocket.

“Admit it. I dare you.”

“You are a very attractive and interesting woman.”

“I want you to admit it.”

“I’m a vigilante. My golden rule has kept me alive. If I don’t break my ‘said rule,’ I’ll keep on living.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

GP looked over his shoulder at a cargo ship coming through the heads into Port Phillip Bay.

“I’m glad I know your secret.” Claire reached up, to touch the brim of GP’s hat. She closed her eyes, tilting it back. Her lips swept his before hovering for a heartbeat. Reeling her in, GP wrapped his arms around her. They both leaned inwards, their lips welding together. They didn’t break the kiss till they were nearing the other side of the bay.

The moment the boat was tied up at the wharf GP and Claire disembarked. Seeing a narrow path leading to the lighthouse, they started walking. The wind felt to be strengthening. The sky appeared to have turned solid grey.

“I hope the weather doesn’t get any worse,” mentioned Claire.

“Me too; at least for the next few hours,” hinted GP, bringing up the rear. He stopped walking. Swiping the wide brimmed hat from his head, GP studied the area, noting the bush appeared to be thickening.

Claire signaled a halt thirty feet from the base of the lighthouse. Glancing around, she found GP twelve feet away. “I hope you’re not tired,” she called.

GP replaced his hat and seemed delighted at not being in control. “I have to confess something to you before we continue,” he said walking up.

Claire pulled him down into a crouched position, staring at the man with the bent head. “I’m listening.”

GP took off his wide-brimmed hat for the second time. He lifted his head so he could look directly at Claire. “I’m not a hood. I don’t work for the underworld.”

“Does this mean you’re not going to kill me?”

GP shook his head. His grin widened by the second.

“I didn’t think so. I could tell.” She let a giggle escape.

“I am a vigilante. The contract out on me happened to be true. I stopped both men in their tracks.”

“What about the story you tell if anyone sees your face they die?”

“It’s worked for a long time. A young woman entered my life years ago. We married. She was a lot like you. Maybe it’s why I’m drawn to you. After the death of my wife ten years ago I vowed never to fall in love again. I took up the vigilante role to rid the streets of crime. It’s worked to a small degree.”

“How did your wife die?”

“I’d rather not say.”

Claire wagged her finger at him. “I believe you’ll tell me everything one day.”

“You’re probably right.”

Claire looked at the man wearing a school girl's expression. "You have the most amazing azure coloured eyes I've ever seen. The time you came to visit me in the hospital when Kendal and I were searching for the heart of a spider; I almost saw in the mirror how handsome you are."

"I was trying to be discreet."

"I believe deep down you wanted me to see what you really looked like."

"Maybe I did."

"Why have you waited for now to confess everything?"

"I'm not sure how to answer your question, except to say, I never intended to fall in love with you."

"Are you always so abrupt in what you say?"

"Yes. It's a bad trait. It's who I am."

"I'm flattered. However now isn't a good time."

"You're right. We have to deliver the package then wait for the messenger to arrive."

"GP, now I know your secret, I promise I will never tell a soul."

Claire gave the man a quick kiss before leading the way to the lighthouse wall. She found the door exactly how the voice on the phone described. Pushing on the door Claire was about to step inside when GP pulled her back flinging her to the ground, knocking the wind out of her lungs. It took Claire a few seconds to catch her breath.

"Why did you drag me to the ground?" she yelled. "This isn't the time or the place to get romantic."

"You didn't see the trip wire?"

"No, I didn't."

Dragging Claire to her feet, they walked over to the door.

"How did you see it? The wire's practically invisible," whispered Claire, squatting to view the wire close up.

"I'm an expert on espionage."

"Interesting," whispered Claire. "Do you want to fill me in on some details?"

"When the time is right I'll speak."

The two moved away from the doorway. They squatted behind the nearest bush to view the area.

"All seems quiet," whispered Claire. She pulled her snub nose gun from her ankle strap and re-zipped the bottom of her leather pants.

GP studied the area around the lighthouse door. "I can't detect anyone. I think we're alone. My theory is whoever planted the surprise package wanted LM dead. Come on let's take a closer look at the bomb."

"Is it a wise move?" questioned Claire grabbing him on the shoulder.

"If nobody turns up it'll be fine."

"What happens if the bomb explodes?"

"It won't."

"You sound pretty sure of yourself?"

"I am. If it didn't have a trip wire I'd be saying to run like the wind. My experience tells me LM was definitely meant to die. He's the one who is supposed to be carrying the money."

“If you’re correct, the money will be blown up too?”

“You have a valid point.”

“All the sequence of events leading to right now can’t be over money,” hinted Claire.

“The person who planted the bomb also must know what they were doing,” snorted GP. “Someone in the town must have been in the army or been trained in espionage.”

“It’s beginning to add up. This is all about wanting Crystal. The bloke behind everything has been working all this out so he can get his hands on the person he loves. He doesn’t care for the money.”

“It sounds logical,” said GP.

Claire added. “When the person rang he didn’t care if the cops turned up or not. His plans don’t include picking up the money. He only wants LM to die. When he’s out of the way he can muzzle into Crystal’s life, shower her with sympathy, gifts, love and affection. Eventually, they’d fall in love. They’ll live happily for the rest of their lives. What a rat.”

“What a plot. I’m glad it’s soiled.” GP paused for a breath. “I hear the sound of a boat approaching. I have a feeling the kidnapper knows he’s been conned. He’s on his way.”

The two stepped towards the lighthouse. Pushing their backs against the exterior wall GP looked through the doorway into the cone shaped building.

“Claire, the wire has been expertly laid across the doorway. You’ll find it at ankle height and piano wire tight. The moment it’s touched the bomb will explode.” GP traced the hair size wire to the wall of the lighthouse where he found a small black bag almost hidden behind a cardboard box.

Stepping over the wire, GP squatted at the entrance to the spiraling staircase.

“I believe the person who planted this device wanted whoever walked through the door to be enchanted by the spiraling balustrade so much they’d miss seeing the wire.”

“Plan ‘B’” suggested Claire. “The victim will be at the pearly gates before realizing he’d been blown up.”

GP nodded at her remark before reaching out for the bag. He didn’t move it or pick it up; he steadied it using his left hand. Using his free hand he slowly unzipped the top. When the gap looked wide enough he took a careful look inside.

“She’s hot to trot,” he announced smoothly. “I haven’t seen this type in a long time.”

“Another piece to the GP puzzle uncovered,” muttered Claire. “Please explain your statement.”

“No.”

“You have too many secrets for your own good.”

GP ignored the comment by restudying the interior of the bag.

“You’ve gone all quiet.”

“I’ve been around.” GP widened the mouth of the bag a tad more. “The bag is packed full of C4 explosives.”

“How large an explosion do you think might be created if the bag blew up?”

“There are enough explosives in this small bag to bring the lighthouse down on top of your pretty head.”

“Is it a calculated guess or do you know exactly?”

“I actually know.”

“I thought you knew more than you’re letting on. You have been around.”

“You’re too clever for your own good, detective.”

“We’re staying formal are we?”

“I’m teasing you,” confessed GP. “You have a way of bringing out all my secrets. Everything in the bag seems awfully familiar. The wire had been stretched across the width of the door. Once something or someone pulls on the wire, the person falls over. There won’t be an explosion for several seconds. By that time, ‘we’ll say you,’ picked yourself up and stumbled outside there’d be an explosion which blows out, not in, hence the lighthouse will be undamaged. However, you will be dead.”

“I thought you reported the lighthouse will come crashing down?”

“I did. After studying the whole set up at length, I’ve changed my mind.”

“If what you say is correct,” said Claire. “There are two paths I’m thinking of. One, it was you who planted the bomb.”

“How could I? For the record, why? I’ve finally found a woman I can love. I don’t want to see her hurt.”

“You did say all who sees your face and knows what you do for a living, dies.”

“I see your reasoning. On this particular occasion, you’re wrong.”

“Okay, if you didn’t do it, the only other thing I can think of is LM is definitely the one who is supposed to die in the explosion.”

“I think it’s a dead set certainty.”

GP and Claire looked at each other. Their faces relayed the fact they’d cracked the case before Kendal. A grin formed on Claire’s olive face. In the split second before she spoke her mobile phone shrilled.

“Claire, Kendal, I’m on my way. I think I’ve figured the whole case out. Whatever you do don’t enter the lighthouse. If I’m right, and I hope I’m wrong, the building might have been rigged to explode the moment you entered.”

“Thanks for the warning, though the information is a tad late.”

“If I’m late, how come you’re still alive?”

“Maybe I’m a ghost?”

“I don’t hear the humour in your voice,” snarled Kendal.

“Partner, sometimes you are a wet blanket.”

“I’m serious. What’s happened?”

“It’s not what happened it’s what was about to happen. GP found a trip wire connected to a bomb in the doorway of the lighthouse. I take it Jeff Arnold is the target in all this mess.”

“You guessed it in one. Be on your guard, the kidnapper is on his way. He’s taken Crystal hostage. I’m almost at the lighthouse. Don’t touch a thing.” Kendal slipped his mobile phone back into his pocket. Turning his attention to LM he nudged him in the ribs to get his attention. “Do you know a man in town who has the knowledge on how to make a bomb? Maybe it’s someone who is, or was, in the army?”

“The only name I can think of is a man called Mitch. He served in the Special Forces. They were training him to be a bomb technician,” confessed LM.

“He might be our man,” jeered Kendal, confidently. “What does he look like?”

“You met him. He’s the barman at the local pub.”

GP slowly cut away the sides of the bag using his scalpel. The blade caused no vibration. He tossed the black vinyl sides away and studied the internal workings of the bomb. Six wires ran from the cake of C4 to a grenade. The trip wire had been tied and soldered to the pin of the grenade.

“This is a basic design.”

“It doesn’t look too basic,” whispered Claire.

“It’s not the three wires you can see, it’s the other three underneath the C4 that is the problem. The three on top are a decoy. By the time you’ve cut the third wire your confidence is at a fever pitch at discovering the whole thing is a hoax. If you cut one of the bottom three it’s bye-bye world and hello St Peter.”

“Now isn’t the time to be joking,” quipped Claire.

“I apologize.”

“You sound slightly nervous.”

“I never get nervous, however, there is always a first time.”

“Before you go any further don’t you think the bomb squad should disarm the bomb?”

“Those blokes have no idea about this type of bomb. Before you say anything, I lost my wife in exactly the same way. She’d been on the phone to me, explaining what we are looking at to the exact detail. I was about to say the wires on top might be a decoy when I heard the explosion.”

“Your confession tells me you’ve been looking for the bloke responsible ever since.”

“To get the story straight, I’ve finally found him. When he arrives in the boat I heard earlier he’s finished.”

“I can’t allow that to happen,” Claire cautioned.

“Let’s see what happens.”

“Promise me you won’t shoot the man.”

“I want to see him go to court. I want to see him in prison,” scoffed GP.

“Do you want to share the man’s name?”

“After an exhaustive search and a couple of sinister men who didn’t take too kindly to my probing, I finally discovered Macgregor rigged the bomb.”

“Do you know what he looks like?”

“I wouldn’t know him if we sat next to each other on a train. The people I’m referring to don’t have their photo taken. The only thing I know is his name, what he does and how he does it.”

“Do you know his first name,” asked Claire.

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

“You want to enlighten me?”

GP stared Claire in the eyes. He looked to be in a bind of how to answer the question.

“A single word answer will suffice.”

GP’s face lost all expression. “It’s my secret.”

“It’s not the answer I’m waiting to hear.”

“I’m sorry. It’s the only one I’m going to give. Before you say another word, please, drop the subject and the police questions. Let’s move forward.”

“I’ll agree for the moment if you answer one more question.”

GP sighed heavily. A slight grin crept across his lips.

“The contract out on you and the message Kendal and I received happened to be it legitimate?”

“Yes. They won’t be saying anything again.”

Refocusing his attention onto the bag, GP moved the C4 upwards slightly. The trip wire tightened. He placed a small stone from the dirt track under the cake and found what he began searching for; a second grenade hidden under a hessian cloth. Attached to it were three wires. He slid the stone out and threw it outside.

“You don’t have a hair pin?” he asked looking at Claire.

She handed one over, watching GP pushing the pin into the firing mechanism of the grenade. Using his scalpel he severed the piano size trip wire. Smiling, he wound the wire into a tight ball, pocketing it.

A boat’s engine fell silent when the craft pulled up at the jetty. The man wearing a black hood tied off the boat.

“Step onto the jetty,” he ordered, pulling a semi-automatic Glock from his belt.

“Where are we going?” asked Crystal.

“For a short walk; if everything goes to plan, I’ll leave you at the base of the lighthouse.”

“Will I be alive,” asked Crystal.

“I’m not a murderer. Now start walking.”

“What is it you want?”

“My dear woman, I’m in it for the money.”

Crystal stopped walking to face the kidnapper. “Your voice doesn’t sound familiar. I’m positive I don’t know you. Who put you up to this and why?”

“It’s none of your concern.”

“Please, you don’t have to do this. I’ll double whatever you were paid.”

The man pushed Crystal in the shoulder, forcing her to walk along the narrow path. At a good distance from the water, she stopped, folded her arms, and whirled around to face the man.

“I refuse to go another step.”

Crystal received a backhand across her face.

“Stop stalling. Start walking.”

“How can a man turn horrible?” she asked, holding her jaw.

“If I hear another word I’ll put a bullet in you. Now shut up, turn around and stop walking only when I order you to.”

A second small boat was beached in total silence on the other side of the lighthouse. A middle-aged man wearing black gumboots stepped into the water up to his ankles and walked ashore. Throwing the boots to the wind, he slipped into a pair of bright new white runners. He darted into the scrub, sprinting along a narrow trail. The lighthouse loomed before him. Approaching the brick structure, the automatic light on the top started to revolve. The light couldn’t penetrate the billowing black clouds of the fast approaching storm. The man squatted behind a large tree so he could view the jetty. Pulling a gun from his pocket, he attached a silencer to the end before focusing on the small craft arriving.

The small boat was still being tied up at the jetty when a bullet splintered the fiberglass hull. The occupants dived behind the boat's two vinyl seats. Kendal pulled his Smith and Wesson out of his shoulder holster. His finger felt at home as it melted around the trigger. He snuck an extra cursory glance at the scrub where he thought the bullet came from. The darkness easily camouflaged the kidnapper. He only waited a short time before signaling to LM and Myriad to stay hidden inside the boat. The owner of the boat cowered inside the half cabin.

Kendal slipped over the side of the boat. He commando crawled along the jetty to the nearest vertical pole.

Another bullet didn't come.

Growing confident, he snuck half bent to the next vertical pole where he studied the scrubland listening to the trees moving in the strengthening wind. Almost certain the kidnapper decided to move on towards the lighthouse, Kendal gave a low sharp whistle in the direction of the boat. LM slipped onto the jetty. In seconds he'd squatted next to Kendal.

"How's it looking?" LM whispered.

"I'm confident the kidnapper has moved off," replied Kendal. "Follow my lead. We'll make for the lighthouse."

A faint shadow crossed the deck of the jetty. Kendal watched it come.

"You should've stayed in the boat."

"I thought an extra pair of eyes might be what you need."

"At a guess anything you observe will be written in your book."

"Exactly," replied Myriad.

"If you tag along you mightn't survive the next hour."

"I'm my own person. You can't make me stay behind."

"I can."

"I won't listen. This scene is the final chapter in my book. I refuse to allow you to dictate what I can or can't do."

Kendal saw LM start to shake his head.

"I'll put it this way," advised Myriad. "Consensual or not, I'm following."

LM, Kendal, and Myriad sprinted through the scrub. Kendal signaled a halt when he saw GP and Claire further up the path.

"I want you both to stay here. Claire and I will defuse the situation."

"I'm coming along," blurted LM. "My wife's out there. I won't take no for an answer. We either both go or you won't."

"Under different circumstances, I'd take your words to be a threat." Kendal slapped LM on the shoulder. "I'd refuse to stay behind. I want to believe the man, we'll call Mitch, doesn't want to hurt your wife."

"How can you say such a thing?"

"If the kidnapper is Mitch, he's the one who caused her to have the accident in your car all those years ago."

"Who's Mitch?" asked Myriad.

"It's a long story," mentioned LM.

“Maybe when the dust settles on what’s transpiring today we can discuss your story at a picnic?” hinted Myriad.

“Maybe one day,” LM said with a sigh.

“Hopefully, this will end quickly. I don’t want to see anyone hurt. I’m also looking forward to our chat.”

Kendal glared coldly at Myriad. “If you’re physic how come you don’t know who Mitch is? Add to the growing list; explain how you knew to come here at this precise moment?”

“I received a message on my computer.”

“From someone who died recently and now resides on the other side?”

“Yes.”

Kendal began massaging his temples. “Stay here. LM let’s go, I can’t stand the thought of leaving you alone with the woman.”

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

GP HEARD the noise of another small boat coming ashore. Finding a cleared site he nestled himself into the nook of a tree to watch. Even though the moon disappeared behind the rain clouds he could plainly see the small section of cleared land around the lighthouse and the jetty. He watched the small boat being dragged up onto the sand. The silhouette of a man began to sneak up the narrow path. He hesitated briefly before climbing the stairs which were carved out of the rock many years earlier.

GP made sure Claire remained hidden and on guard near the lighthouse door.

The intruder left the stairs and walked right past GP. After waiting a few seconds GP copied his style. Both walked in unison. GP’s footsteps were in perfect synchronization with the medium sized male. Several times the stranger stopped to look about the area. GP silently slipped behind a tree. The noise of the thin layer of sand under the man’s feet masked any noise GP might have made.

Hearing a muffled scream after a gunshot, the man took off at speed. The lighthouse seemed to be dismissed as he sprinted to find a hiding place. He crouched behind a tree, looking more than ready to ambush whoever came up the path.

GP snuck back up to the clearing at the base of the lighthouse. “Our guests have arrived,” he whispered in Claire’s ear.

Two dark figures burst into the clearing. Walking towards the lighthouse they were almost at the door when the man, half dragging a struggling woman, stopped and stared at the bomb leaning against the side of the door.

“I’ll take over from here,” advised the man GP was following.

The man dragged Crystal in close.

“Drop the woman. Take your money. It’s in the bag.”

“I knew I’d be double crossed. I don’t believe there’s money in the bag.”

“There’s plenty of money.”

“Mitch, any fool can tell there’s a bomb in there.”

“You were supposed to be here after the bomb exploded.”

“You’re little plan seems to have a flaw in it,” spat the hooded man holding Crystal in a death grip.

“I ordered LM to bring the money so he’d be blown up.”

“If he died how do get my money for kidnapping Crystal?”

“I have it here in my pocket.”

“Convince me what you’re saying is true.”

“Discard the woman. I’ll give you the money,” growled Mitch.

The kidnapper forced Crystal to kneel on the sand. Instead of letting her go the man pulled a gun, pushing it against the back of her head. “The money, right now or it’s bye-bye to the woman you love.”

”Okay, here’s the money. Don’t get nervous, I’m only reaching for the envelope. It’s white. Actually, the money’s in two envelopes.”

Mitch slowly pulled the first envelope out of his pocket. He placed it on the tree stump he decided to lean against and pushed his hand into his coat pocket a second time. “Here’s the second one. I’ll place it next to the first envelope.”

While he talked he pulled his semi-automatic Glock out of his pocket, aimed it at the man, pulling the trigger. The kidnapper died before he crumpled to the ground.

Mitch walked over to Crystal, pulling her to a standing position.

“Mitch, thank-you so much for coming to my rescue,” sobbed Crystal, looking into his eyes.

“You’re a real saint aren’t you Mitch,” jeered Claire stepping out from behind the tree. She lifted her gun so it pointed directly at Mitch’s chest. “Toss the gun onto the ground. You’re under arrest for the killing the hooded man and for plotting to kill Jeff Arnold.”

Crystal managed to break free of Mitch’s grip. She took several back steps. “Is it true?”

“No, it’s not.”

Claire began to step forward. “Yes, it is. Crystal, come over here.”

Before Crystal could move, Mitch lunged forward, grabbing her arm. He started dragging her back towards the lighthouse.

“Let me go.”

GP emerged from the scrub. Raising his gun, he barked through clenched teeth. “Is your name Mitch Macgregor?”

“Who wants to know?”

“Someone you don’t want to meet.”

“Everyone knows I’m Mitch Macgregor.”

“Let the woman go.”

Kendal and LM burst out of the scrub. “Everyone take it easy. Mitch, you’re surrounded, drop your gun. Let Crystal go,” urged Kendal, pointing his gun directly at Mitch.

He dragged Crystal closer to the lighthouse. In a show of power, he pulled her in tight for protection. “Get back all of you or I’ll kill the woman.”

GP shrunk back into the scrub to disappear.

Mitch started stepping through the open doorway into the lighthouse, tossing Crystal back and forth like a rag-doll. "I won't tell you again. Get back or I'll shoot the woman."

"No, you won't," yelled Kendal.

"Be warned, I will."

"Everyone here understands what you've been going through."

"That's crap."

Using his peripheral vision LM started to make his way around the other side of the lighthouse. Kendal couldn't do a thing about stopping the man. If he did, LM or Crystal might be shot.

"Let the woman go. You don't want to hurt her," yelled Kendal.

"Don't I?"

"Take a look around, there's no escape."

"Are you sure?"

Kendal pointed his weapon into the air before tossing it onto a small bush growing at the edge of the clearing.

"I've loved this woman since I kissed her on my fifteenth birthday. Everything would have been perfect if Arnold didn't hand over the car keys. Which reminds me where is he? I saw him a few seconds ago."

"He's back at the boat," Kendal lied.

"Get him here. I want to know why he gave Crystal the car keys on the day of the accident."

"So you cut the brake cable?"

"I reckon I'd easily win Crystal's affection once LM was out of the way."

"Things happen in life which can't be avoided," yelled LM, standing at the side of the gunman behind a tree.

"So you are here. Coppa, you lied."

"Listen to the words LM spoke," advised Kendal.

"Spare me the crap wisdom." Mitch stepped further into the lighthouse.

Kendal stepped closer. He didn't want either him or Crystal in the lighthouse. The only way out of the cone shaped building was to jump. "Mitch, let the woman go so we can talk."

"I'm through talking. I've planned all of this for one reason."

"Why?"

"I want Crystal to be my wife. If I can't have her, nobody will."

"So your plans didn't include Sam. You wanted her out of the way so you could have a free go at Crystal."

"Close enough to perfect," yelled Mitch.

"You forgot one small detail," hinted Kendal.

"I forgot nothing."

"LM will still be alive."

Claire cut in as she stepped closer to Crystal. "You wanted LM to deliver the money so he'd be blown up by the bomb you planted. It's the reason why you wanted the police here, so you could play the hero. The problem being, the man you paid to kidnap Crystal came early. Your plans have bullet holes in it."

Kendal knew beyond a doubt he needed to get Crystal away from Mitch. Once the lighthouse door was shut he'd have to order two body bags. Inwardly he swore heavily.

"The facts are still not accurate are they Mitch?"

"If you think you know the answer, tell me the punch line."

"You were paid a lot of money by someone overseas for girls. The first round of girls happened to be decoys so you'd have a green light in the kidnapping of Sam. You arranged for the kidnapper to meet you and Crystal here. Whether LM is blown up or not you didn't care, you knew the police will stop him from bringing the ransom money. It's not what you care about. You wanted the money you'd get for Sam. You wanted to play hero in front of the cops so you devised a way to kill the hooded man and make it look self-defense. What about the news one of the girls died? Doesn't the information pull at your heart strings?"

Mitch looked to be growing restless. "I didn't want them hurt. If they listened to what I told them they'd have a good life."

"Do you honestly believe being sold into the sex trade will be a good life?" barked Claire.

"They were street kids. They didn't have a life. I gave them a second chance. They'd have been treated like queens."

"In your dreams buddy," growled Claire.

Mitch moved his gun between Claire and Kendal. Both dived for the bush as two bullets rang out.

"Crystal won't agree to love you now," called Kendal.

"Eventually, she will come to terms with the death of her husband. I'll be right by her side to comfort her in the pain."

"You and I will never be together," spat Crystal, struggling to free herself from his death grip.

"Yes, we will. Soon you and I will be together forever."

"Your plan completely backfired," growled Kendal, pulling his snub nose revolver from his ankle strap.

"My plan has been perfectly prepared." Mitch tossed Crystal to the floor of the lighthouse like an old rag. He reached up, slamming the door shut. Kendal heard a bolt slide home. He picked up his gun from the middle of the bush, housed it in his shoulder holster and sprinted for the door. He tried the door handle. It turned, but the door remained closed. The sliding bolt did its job.

Mitch kept shoving Crystal in the shoulder blades forcing her to climb to the top of the lighthouse.

Crystal hesitated at every window to look at the approaching storm. The cold front boasting black clouds thundered across the sky towards them. In the distance, lightning pierced the darkness.

"Mitch, why don't you let me go?"

"No, I want you to come away with me."

"Where will we go?"

"To another country."

"To live comfortably you need a job."

“I’m a good barman.”

Mitch pushed Crystal in the back again. When they reached the halfway point Crystal looked out of the narrow window. She saw the rain starting to fall. It resembled a sheet of grey fog. Another jab to her left shoulder blade made her walk on.

“Mitch, why did you cause me to have the accident when you admitted you loved me?”

“The accident wasn’t my fault.”

Crystal stopped her climb yet again. Turning, she faced her warden. “Yes, it was. You planned the whole thing. I could have been killed.”

“You weren’t supposed to be driving the car.”

“Why did you rig the car to crash?”

“Again I ask why you insisted on driving the old wreck of a Ute.”

“I wanted to go for a drive. LM told me no.”

“You should’ve listened.”

“I know. Being young, I wanted to drive. I also knew I’d get my way. LM loved me. We were in love. Hindsight is a wonderful thing. If I knew what lay in wait for me I’d have stayed in the classroom.”

“If you only listened to Arnold all this could’ve been avoided.”

“The kidnapping of my only daughter not to mention the innocent lives of those girls, how could you be so callous? Looking at you I can tell you will never show remorse for your actions. Besides, the accident happened a long time ago, we’ve all moved on.”

“You might have, I didn’t. I need to finish this.”

“How?”

“You’ll be coming with me.”

“What if I refuse to bend to your demands?”

“You have no choice.”

Standing directly underneath the glass dome Mitch forced Crystal to open the trap door. He brought up the rear, slamming the door under his feet. He bolted it shut before marching to the glass door. He threw it open. Almost immediately the wind nearly blew him off his feet. Mitch stepped out into the wind. In a few minutes, he’d be forced to shut the door to stop the rain from pouring inside the dome. Looking over the railing at the ground below, he beckoned Crystal over. She hesitantly ventured close to the door. Clinging to the door frame her words came across as mumbles.

“I’m scared of heights.”

Mitch looked Crystal in the eyes. “Since when?”

“I’ve always been scared.”

“Come over here so we can leave.”

Crystal cowered backwards away from the fresh air. The trudging of shoes on the metal stairs vibrated under her feet.

“Get over here, now,” spat Mitch.

A flash of lightning lit the glass dome. The wind started howling through the doorway. Crystal shook her head, squatted and pulled back the long bolt which held tight the trap door. Glancing at Mitch, she pulled the trap door open and sprinted down the spiraling staircase two at a time.

“Damn the woman,” he cursed. Aiming his gun at the storm, he pulled the trigger. Five bullets split the black clouds while rain started to splatter against the glass dome.

Shouting at the base of the lighthouse made him freeze. Mitch pointed his gun straight down. He pulled the trigger. He ran to the trap door, pointing his gun through the hole. “Crystal, get back here or I’ll be forced to shoot.”

Hearing the echo of footsteps picking up their pace, he fired twice down the spiraling stairs.

LM dived for the wall as the bullets ricocheted down the staircase. He groaned when one penetrated his thigh muscle. He crumpled to the stairs.

Crystal lost her footing and bounced head over heels down the next eleven steps. LM grabbed her, stopping the fall. Hugging her husband, Crystal kissed him.

“Are you okay?” she asked, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“I’m fine. What about you?”

“I’ll be okay.”

“I want you to take it slow going down,” whispered LM. “I’m going after Mitch.”

“LM, the only place you’re going is downstairs,” urged Kendal.

Looking up at the manhole cover he quickly ascended. Claire followed. Both held their guns outstretched, cocked and ready to fire.

“Mitch, you have nowhere to run. Throw your weapon down the stairs,” ordered Claire.

Mitch slammed the trapdoor shut. Squatting, he locked it.

LM kissed Crystal on the lips. So as not to be heard by Kendal he whispered in her ear. “I’m going after Mitch. He must have a rope to climb down from the top. By the time his feet touch the ground, I’m going to be waiting.”

Mitch walked to the center of the dome, pulled a metal climbing cleat from his pocket and clamped it to his belt. Casually walking into the strengthening wind he saluted the locked trap door. The wind pushed him along the narrow ledge to the wayward side of the lighthouse where the wind suddenly died. Mitch reached above his head, pulling at a similar clip which was attached to a wire. He yanked on the cable before diving over the edge of the lighthouse wall.

The flying fox cable worked perfectly. Mitch slowly applied a hand brake. In less than a minute, his feet gently touched the ground not far from the beach. Glancing over his shoulder at the lighthouse, he mumbled.

“Crystal, I’d have seen to it you and I made a great life together, if only you listened to me all those years ago.” He punched the air using a white-knuckled fist, pulled his gun from his pocket, aimed at the lighthouse dome and pulled the trigger. He heard the sound of breaking glass. The bright beam of light sparked like a New Years Eve fireworks display before it went out, plunging the area into darkness. “It’s the only thing which has gone right in my life,” he moaned, walking through the rain towards his boat.

Halfway to the beach, a figure stepped from behind a tree.

“Why are you in such a hurry?”

Mitch spun in circles searching for the man behind the voice.

“You’re looking in the wrong place,” growled the gruff voice.

Mitch reacted by spinning too slowly towards the west. His nose was broken by an iron fist. He staggered backwards, crashing his shoulder into a tree knocking the gun from his hand. The man brandishing rock hard knuckles stepped forward. He swung a second time. Mitch ducked and kicked out. The move sent the man reeling backwards. He straightened before lunging again.

“LM, you shouldn’t have interfered. Get away.” Mitch swiped his half buried gun from the sand, aimed it at his attacker, pulling the trigger.

LM staggered away, falling behind a tree. Crystal came bursting through the scrub screaming. Mitch back stepped, staring at the woman he loved through wide eyes.

“Mitch how could you even contemplate doing a horrific thing as to shoot my husband. All he has ever done is show kindness to every person he’s met. There is no way on this earth I’ll ever be with you. Not now, not ever.”

Sprinting for Mitch, Crystal pushed him to the ground and started kicking at his ribs. Mitch grabbed her ankle, pulling Crystal’s feet from under her. She fell hard against the ground. She squealed, trying to push the man away.

For a moment Mitch stared into her eyes. “I’ve always loved you. I always will. Jumping to his feet he sprinted through the scrub towards the jetty.

Crystal crawled to where her husband lay. Staring at his face, she started sobbing.

Hearing more gunfire, Kendal and Claire leapt down the inside of the lighthouse cone stairwell three steps at a time. They burst outside into the storm. For a few seconds, they stood in the rain.

“What’s wrong?” yelled Claire over the noise of the wind. “We have to get to the jetty.”

“Mitch is crazy, not stupid. He knows the police are at the jetty. He must have come into shore on a small boat somewhere else.”

When lightning split the ink coloured sky, Kendal looked up at the lighthouse wall. The bright flash lit the cable.

“There,” he spat pointing. “Come on, we’ll trace the wire. It should lead us directly to Mitch.”

“Sugar, it will be near impossible to trace the wire if Mitch cuts it at ground level.”

“Valid point, let’s hope he’s in too much of a hurry to think of the idea.”

Kendal led the way into the scrub. The wind seemed to be worsening by the minute. The rain blasted both faces of the detectives.

“The wire seems to be following the narrow path” reported Claire.

“Hopefully all the way to the beach,” added Kendal. “Let’s pick up our pace.”

The two detectives snaked their way through the scrub. The sandy trail opened up at the beach. The wind seemed relatively calm in the house sized cove. Kendal pointed to a small boat sitting on the sand well away from the rising sea. They searched the area thoroughly before sneaking up to the side of the boat.

“This boat isn’t going anywhere,” advised Claire over a clap of thunder. “Somebody did a good job on sabotaging it. The motor’s fuel line has been cut. Also, there are two holes the size of a twenty cent piece in the bottom; one at the front of the boat and one close to the motor.”

“This looks like GP’s work,” announced Kendal. “I wondered where he went; now I know.”

“I think all the action will be at the jetty,” said Claire.

“Agreed, we better hurry.”

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

MITCH CURSED the storm when he discovered what happened to his escape boat. For a few minutes, he walked in tight circles around the disabled craft. Using his gun to hit out at the sides of the fiberglass boat, he stared down the beach towards the jetty, where he saw the waves crashing against the vertical poles. The two boats tied to the side started bobbing violently. Running along the beach Mitch stopped a short distance from the jetty and dived for the scrub. If he wanted to make a clean get away he needed to stay hidden. After discovering LM had died the cops will certainly be after his tail. The only woman he’d ever loved will want to see him incarcerated in jail for the rest of his life.

“How could my plans have gone so pear-shaped,” he mumbled.

For a good couple of minutes, Mitch sat amongst the tee tree weighing up his choices. He lifted his gun, staring at the barrel.

“LM is what went wrong. If only he’d been driving the Ute back in school he’d have died and Crystal would be my wife. I’m not even man enough to pull the trigger,” he groaned, looking at the sky. When rain fell in his eyes he spat. “I’ve made a new plan. I’ll shoot my way to freedom.”

Mitch marched along the water’s edge, his gun, cocked and ready.

Kendal and Claire saw Mitch walking towards the jetty. They heard sobbing coming from the scrub and ran over to investigate. They found Crystal hugging LM. Blood oozed from a bullet hole in his side. Kendal squatted to quickly check his vitals. He looked LM in the eyes, tapping him on the shoulder.

“You’re one lucky bloke. The bullet has only grazed your side. The one in your leg has an exit hole. A few stitches will see you looking like new.”

“Sugar, you go stop Mitch I’ll call for the air ambulance. I’ll catch up in ten minutes.”

“Don’t be late. I might need you for back up.”

“I’ll be there.”

Kendal weaved his way through the tee tree till he reached the shoreline. The storm easily masked any sounds coming through the bush. Wiping the rain from his face Kendal found Mitch still walking directly at the jetty. He looked to be transfixed on hijacking one of the boats then he saw Mitch dive into the scrub out of sight.

Kendal stared at the exact location where Mitch vanished. He kept to the scrub the best he could. Closing in, Kendal slowed his pace. Half bent he hid behind a small thick bush to wait.

The shape of a man emerged from the bush. Kendal watched him straighten his clothes before walking casually towards the first boat.

At the halfway mark Kendal raised his gun. Taking careful aim he stepped from the scrub, yelling. "Police, lie on the ground and don't move."

Mitch whirled around, searching the darkness. Kendal pulled the trigger of his gun. Mitch went down the gun spilling from his grip. He quickly rolled into the scrub before jumping to his feet. Kendal ran after the hobbling man as he started for the first boat. He watched in horror as the gunman pulled a second gun from his pocket. The action forced Kendal to dive for cover behind a large twisted tree stump growing sideways along the sand. Three bullets embedded in the trunk close to Kendal's shoulder. The wind sucked the bark fragments away. Above the scene, lightning lit the sky. Kendal instantly counted the seconds. He'd counted to three before he heard the familiar deep rumble.

'The storm's almost on top of us,' he thought, quickly calculating the distance.

Mitch took advantage of the sudden break in the pursuit by hobbling faster down the beach. He arrived at the jetty and commenced to untie the mooring ropes. When Mitch saw Kendal starting to close the gap between them he hurriedly pulled the trigger of his gun.

"Mitch, hit the deck or I'll be forced to shoot again," yelled Kendal.

At the end of the jetty, unseen eyes watched Mitch hobble from one end of the boat to the other desperately trying to untie the mooring ropes while swaying his gun back and forth in front of him, mumbling incoherent words under his breath. A trail of red lined the center of the newly constructed jetty.

The man behind the unseen eyes slowly closed in. He resembled an old man fishing for his next meal. The dirty old bucket he carried in his left hand looked older than him. The man seemed to stumble slightly on frail bent legs. He raised his head slightly to glimpse at the gun-wielding man. For a few uneasy moments, they stared at each other. The old timer lowered his head so his eyes were hidden under the wide brimmed hat. The rain poured from his hat like a waterfall. He shuffled several small steps before facing the water. Slowly the man lifted his right hand, extracting a scalpel from its sheath hidden inside his coat. His wide brimmed hat masked his cold steel murderous expression. Using his peripheral vision he looked to be fixed on the man holding the gun. The old man didn't flinch when hail started to fall. The man holding the gun looked to be growing edgy at taking too long to untie the last knot. When he'd unraveled the knot he could make a clean get-a-way.

The scalpel-wielding man sidestepped his way along the jetty. Both he and the storm were closing in.

Mitch finally flung the mooring rope into the water, jumped onto the boat and quickly made his way to the wheelhouse. To keep Kendal at bay he fired spontaneously at the beginning of the jetty. Mitch didn't give the old timer a second look. He emptied the gun of bullets, reloaded a new clip and fired at Kendal again.

GP dropped his hat neatly onto a wooden vertical pole before slipping into the water. He made no splash which might have given away his stealth move. GP swam a gentle breaststroke underwater towards the boat.

The motor revved to life. The boat slowly left the edge of the jetty. Using a white knuckled death grip on his knife GP stabbed holes in the bottom of the boat. The knife slashed

the fiberglass hull easy as a hot knife cutting through butter. He reached up, jamming the end of his gun into the reverberating propeller blades. The engine groaned. The crunch of metal against metal could be heard all the way to the lighthouse.

The boat stopped ten metres from the jetty. Water poured in through the holes in the bottom of the boat. In seconds the boat listed to port. Through wide eyes Mitch watched sea water starting to lick the top edge of the boat. Jumping overboard into the turbulent sea, one-metre waves crashed over Mitch's head.

Kendal sprinted for the second boat.

Mitch struck out for the jetty. A trail of blood flowed from the bullet wound in his leg. Three hundred metres further out to sea a two-metre shark hunting for food suddenly changed direction, making a bee-line for the jetty.

GP quietly swam to shore. He walked out of the surf, strolled across the sand and stepped into the scrub. Forked lightning stabbed the darkness picking out GP's cold murderous eyes watching the figure in the water struggling against the waves. Mitch made it to the bottom step of the jetty. He set himself to climb out of the water when a black fin surfaced. In desperation, Mitch pulled his legs free of the water. Opening its mouth the shark tasted the metal step. Slowly the black shape slipped away from the jetty.

Kendal took charge of the moment. He sprinted along the jetty lifting his gun to eye level, yelling.

"Mitch, throw your gun into the water and place your hands on top of your head."

The man whipped his gun around. He didn't move fast enough to avoid Kendal's shoe. The gun lofted into the air, splashing into the sea. Kendal reached out, grabbing the man, yanking Mitch backwards up the stairs. Mitch twisted his torso, his fist smacking Kendal's chin. Both men went down. Neither was going to give an inch. They wrestled along the boardwalk before both landing in the water.

Kendal started treading water, thumping Mitch several times before he managed to subdue the man. Holding the man by the collar, Kendal began lifesaving backstroke. Then he saw the shark's blackfin returning. He knew it must have smelt the blood in the water. Glancing over his shoulder Kendal discovered he was only several large strokes away from the jetty. Seeing Claire sprinting along the pier towards the end he doubled his efforts to arrive at the steps before the shark closed to within striking distance.

Grabbing hold of Mitch, Claire began to heave the dead weight onto the boardwalk.

Realizing he didn't have enough time to get out of the water, Kendal slipped silently under the surface watching for the shark.

A second dark shape approaching from the direction of the sunken boat un-nerved him. Kendal's mind slipped back to his dream. In it, he found the dead girls. For a split second, he wondered why his dreams were always about future events. Surely Myriad couldn't be a real medium. No matter how he viewed the woman the fact remained every dream was played out at some time in each case. He pondered the question; will he live long enough to uncover the solution.

Both dark shapes, one on Kendal's left and one directly ahead were zeroing in fast. Kendal, treading water, prepared for battle by squaring himself to the dark shapes. He pulled his snub nose revolver from his ankle strap, his Smith and Wesson from his shoulder holster

and pointed both guns at the blurred image of the shark. Kendal prayed at least one of the guns will fire. He quickly decided a sharp knife might have been the best weapon.

Kendal pulled the trigger of both guns at the same time. All he felt was the vibration of the two firing mechanisms.

‘Two onto one, this will be interesting,’ he thought.

His lungs were starting to ache. He resisted the urge to bob his head out of the water. He couldn’t risk the time. Bracing for the final onslaught Kendal stared at the exact place he’d attack the first shark. The barrel of the snub nose was going to be embedded into the shark’s left eye. Rolling away from its mouth, he’d use the butt of his Smith and Wesson as a hammer and hit the other.

The second shark changed direction, falling into line, tailgating the first.

Seconds separated the moment. Everything seemed to happen in one fast perpetual smooth movement.

Kendal’s lungs were beyond aching. He forced the thought from his mind, determined not to die this way.

The first shark looked to be almost on him. It opened its mouth to reveal razor sharp teeth. Kendal tensed. In a few seconds, the show will be over. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a third shape. The dark figure, holding a razor sharp scalpel swam at speed towards the lead shark. The figure darted under its belly, easily gutting it while it swam. The ocean pooled blood red. The second shark started to circle at a distance, obviously confused by what had happened. The figure changed direction. He swam upwards and collected Kendal. They surfaced as one. Kendal heaved in oxygen before both struck out for the jetty. The two men were out of the water, standing on the wooden planks staring at the second shark eating its fill.

Kendal faced the man who came to his rescue. He extended his hand in gratitude while Claire watched on.

“GP, thanks for coming to my rescue.”

“No problem. What are friends for?”

“I owe you one,” hinted Kendal.

“You owe me two.”

Kendal frowned.

“I’ve decided to go against my beliefs and not kill you.”

“You’re all heart. I knew one day you’d back away from your oath.”

“Me too,” confessed GP casually waving his hand in the air. “I’ll let Claire explain the way I think.”

“A verbal report might be best,” advised Kendal, looking at Claire.

“You and GP are both pig headed. Claire, the only thing you ever think about is being a better cop than the previous day.”

Both men chuckled at her brooding expression. Eventually, Claire giggled too.

“Thanks for the help in getting Mitch out of the water.”

“I didn’t want to see either you or Mitch mulched into fish food and if it’s the best apology you’re going to give, I’ll take it for now. You’ll keep Alan James Kendal.”

“What do you mean?”

“My lips are sealed,” advised Claire. “Sometimes when you know something, it’s worth keeping it a secret.”

“You can give your verbal report on the way back to Police Headquarters,” insisted Kendal.

“I’ll give you a verbal report after my date and not a second sooner. I will also only tell you what you need to know, not a letter more,” advised Claire.

“You have a date, with whom?”

“A bloke you know very well.”

“No way.” Kendal chuckled.

“Yep, GP has promised me a fantastic night on the town. Take my advice, don’t wait up.” Walking off, her arm around GP, she turned to look directly at Kendal. “Clean up the mess will you?” Giggling, she led the way to another boat.

Kendal shook his head and pulled the handcuffs from his back pocket. “Mitch, you’re under arrest. Start confessing every detail of your story,” Kendal growled. “Don’t jerk me around either; I’m not in the mood.” Looking up at GP and Claire clambering into the small boat, he added “Mitch Macgregor, I’ll let you in on a little secret. I’m in the foulest mood you can imagine. I can tell even at this distance GP finally tracked you down. He got his wish. He’s true to his word.”

“What did I do?”

“For now, your question will go unanswered. You’re going to be in jail for a long time. Let me give you a word of advice. Don’t sleep. Never turn your back on an inmate. GP let you live long enough for you to wish he’d cut you like he did the shark. If you spill what you know maybe you might get out of jail alive.”

Mitch stared at the last remaining boat tied to the end of the jetty. “I’ll confess,” he sighed. Lifting his gaze, he stared at Crystal before beginning his unbelievable story. “I cut the brake cable to Jeff’s brakes. I followed him to the school oval to make sure you didn’t get in the car. Everything went according to my plan.”

“It didn’t go well at all,” yelled Crystal.

“No. I was so close to you I could hear the argument. You wanted to go for a drive by yourself. Jeff didn’t want you to go. He said after school he’d let you drive. You told him no. Before he knew, you snatched the car keys from his pocket and were running towards the car.”

“Why didn’t you try to stop me?”

“I felt scared.”

“You could’ve saved all the problems,” blurted Kendal.

“I know it now. I couldn’t take the chance Crystal mightn’t choose me to her husband. I already proposed a few weeks earlier. I wanted to tip the scales in my favour. I watched from the bushes. I decided to sprint to where I poured oil onto the road. When Crystal saw me standing at the bend I felt positive she’d stop to pick me up. I could always try again some other time.”

“Why didn’t you make it?” asked Kendal.

“I lost my footing and rolled my ankle on the wet grass. I sobbed for weeks. I did go to the hospital several times. I just couldn’t bring myself to show my face. I felt too ashamed. I

went off to construct my revenge. I left a bomb for a practice. It's when I heard the news a woman working for the bomb disposal unit died from the exploding bomb I planted."

"In the meantime Crystal married Jeff," continued Kendal.

"The marriage only stirred the pot."

"Why kidnap innocent girls to place them into slavery?" questioned Kendal.

"I needed cash to lead a good life. The girls would give me the life Crystal and I longed for. I'd have treated her like royalty."

"Why did you have to come to the lighthouse?"

"The only free way out of this country was to kidnap another girl."

Kendal looked horrified. His stomach turned into knots. "Are you saying there's another?"

"Yes, I kidnapped her yesterday. Nobody will ever miss another street kid. Then eventually I'd use the same method to smuggle me and Crystal out of Australia."

"Where's the girl?"

"At the same place, I kept the others while the ship was being loaded."

"Tell me about the foiled explosion at the lighthouse?"

"I rigged the bomb to get rid of Jeff. I'd comfort Crystal till she came around to loving me. In time I knew she'd love me again."

"Only in your dreams, Mitch," spat Crystal.

"Is there anything else you'd like to add?" asked Kendal.

Mitch bowed his head. "Yes, When Crystal dived overboard into the sink hole I was going to tie a rope to the steering wheel then push the throttle to the fully open position and dive into the sinkhole after Crystal. Eventually, the boat will run out of fuel in bass straight. A pre-armed bomb will explode, sinking the boat. I'd make sure of this fact by bolting heavy blocks of metal to the sides. The police will never find the boat."

"Tell me where the container is?" spat Kendal.

"It's the one thing I'm keeping a secret. If you let me go I'll tell."

"I don't make deals."

"Find it yourself."

Kendal took hold of Mitch's collar. Raising his fist he spat. "If I wasn't a cop I have a good mind to knock your block off. Mister, you're going away for a long time." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a figure watching him. He pushed Mitch to the ground before walking over. "Myriad, I need to borrow your mobile phone."

Snatching her phone, Kendal tapped out Claire's number. The phone rang out. He dialed GP's phone number. On the seventh ring, a voice answered.

"I hope this won't be a familiar trait of yours?" asked GP. "I'm sort of busy. I've got this dark haired woman in my arms."

"Put Claire on," said Kendal.

"Alan, it's nice to hear from you. Your timing is lousy."

"The police department needs you."

"I'm thinking of retiring again."

"No, you won't."

"Want a bet?" snickered Claire.

“What if I told you the case needs you?”

“You’ll have to say a lot more to convince me.”

“Okay, you win, I need you,” blurted Kendal, shaking his head.

“As I’ve already stated earlier, was it so hard to say?”

“Yes.”

“What’s so important it can’t wait for sunrise? If you haven’t noticed it’s raining.”

“There’s been another kidnapped girl. Mitch placed her in the same shipping container you and Tegan were in. Where is it?”

“GP and I will swing back to pick you up. We’ll be at the site in about two minutes.”

“Mitch, get ready; we’re going for a boat ride. Constable, secure this man. Handcuff all four of his limbs to the boat if you have to. Here comes Claire.”

A fifteen foot half cabin boat pulled up at the jetty. Claire looked a little sheepish.

“Are you ready to follow?” she croaked.

“Lead on partner. Constable, stick to the other boat like glue. Crystal and LM, please stay here. The air ambulance won’t be long.”

Both boats roared away from the jetty. Though the wind looked to be abating, the waves were peaking at the two-metre mark.

The two boats made their way past the breakers before they were piloted parallel to the shore. The waves slowly shrunk back to a manageable one-metre swell. Kendal looked over his shoulder at Myriad. Even in the darkness, her face looked green. Looking his way, Myriad heaved her last meal into the water. A feeling of sympathy tore at Kendal’s heart.

In ninety seconds GP eased their boat onto the sand at a small clearing. The young Constable copied his move. In the tiny cove, the wind and the waves were non-existent.

“Nice place for a picnic,” mentioned Myriad, her face starting to return to a normal colour.

Kendal glared at the woman. “Somewhere close by a teenage girl could be half out of her mind and you’re thinking of a picnic? You of all people should know food at this moment is not the best solution.”

“I’m only trying to lighten the mood, Detective.”

“Seeing how you believe your psychic powers are strong, tell me where the girl is?”

“I’m not feeling well at the moment. My powers are somewhat drained.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“What do you mean?”

“Cast your mind back to when we first met.”

“I’ve a throbbing headache. I can’t think.”

“Let me refresh your memory,” urged Kendal. “I didn’t believe you then. I don’t believe you now. You’re a fraud.”

Myriad opened her mouth to speak; instead, she vomited next to the boat.

“Myriad, please stay here next to GP,” advised Claire. “This won’t take long.”

“I’m going for a walk,” hinted GP. “Take in the sights. “Besides, if I stay here, Mitch might draw his last breath.”

Kendal began marching up the beach towards the scrub. Claire ran after him. Myriad shadowed them both.

The moment the two detectives entered the scrub, Claire glared at her partner.

“What’s the look for?” asked Kendal.

“Do you think leaving Mitch Macgregor lashed to the side of the boat was a wise move?”

“I can’t see the problem.”

“GP will murder the man.”

“You mean your boyfriend?”

For his remark Kendal received a jab in the shoulder.

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“It certainly looks like he is. Especially when you waltzed off arm in arm.” Kendal ducked the next fist. He lifted his hands. “Let’s say I’m teasing and call it quits.”

“Deal,” barked Claire. “Tell me something. Why do you think Mitch will be alive when we get back? Or is it your plan to have GP murder the man. It might be an easy report to write.”

“Your idea has yet to enter my mind.”

GP waited for Claire and Kendal to vanish through the scrub before walking back up the beach. For several minutes he stood leaning against the side of the boat watching Mitch. He looked relaxed under the circumstances.

The young Constable walked over to GP. “Are you okay mate? You look a little bothered.”

GP didn’t give the man eye contact. Moving at lightning speed he knocked him unconscious and quickly tethered him to the side of the boat.

Mitch opened his eyes at the commotion. He stared bug-eyed at the man wearing the wide brimmed hat jumping into the boat glaring at him through murderous eyes.

“Stay away,” stammered Mitch. “What do you want?”

“I thought we might have a short conversation, man to man,” whispered GP, slipping his hand into his pocket.

“You’re going to shoot me?”

GP pulled out a packet of cigarettes. “Like a smoke?”

“No.”

“It’ll soothe your nerves.”

“I thought you were going to kill me?” whispered Mitch.

GP pulled out a single cigarette, placing it in Mitch’s mouth. He lit the end, watching Mitch inhale. When he talked the cigarette wobbled at the corner of his mouth.

“You’re not having one?”

GP shook his head. “Those things will kill you.”

“So why offer me one?” growled Mitch, spitting the cigarette onto the sand. “Did you drop arsenic on the end?”

“You sound like you don’t trust me.”

“I don’t.”

“I won’t hold it against you. Do you want to have a chat?”

“About what?”

“Your future.”

“I’ve nothing to say to you.”

“I thought you might be a reasonable man and tell me exactly where the girl is.”

“What girl?”

“The one Kendal and Claire are searching for.”

“They don’t need my help.”

“I think they do. We’re not in the right place are we?”

“Can’t you tell I’m not interested in talking to you?”

“Yes, you are. Tell me where the girl is?”

“In your dreams mate.”

“Let me explain what I’ve got on my mind. Firstly, I’m nobody’s mate.”

“You and Kendal look cozy.”

“He’s a colleague, nothing more.”

“That’s not what it looks like. Being cops, you’re on the same side.”

GP let go of a short sharp chuckle. “I’m no cop.”

“If you’re not a cop, why hang with the man?”

“He’s a friend who is need of a hand or bone or whatever I can do to get the information he wants. You have to believe me, being a cop has its limitations. Did you know they can’t inflict torture on someone?”

“You’re right mate they can’t.”

“Can you do me a favour, stop calling me mate. How can I accomplish what I have on my mind when you think I’m your mate?”

“Go away, fly.”

GP leaned closer to Mitch. “Can I tell you a short story?”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“I’ll take it you mean yes. A few years back I wanted to see the sights in another country. They weren’t too thrilled with me being there. They taught me everything I know about torture. Let me inform you they were masters of the craft. After surviving the tenth round of torture I persuaded them in letting me in on their plans.”

“You should have called the cops.”

“The cops were in on the whole charade.”

“Why did you go to the country in the first place?”

GP lifted his finger. “This is my story don’t interrupt. I will say this. I visited the country due to the fact I heard the bomb expert, the one who masterminded a bomb which killed my wife happened to be there.”

Mitch’s Adam’s apple bobbed sharply when he swallowed. He glared sideways at GP.

“I discovered these torture experts were going to inflict pain by a new method. They gave me four hours to think about the information they wanted. They laid out exactly what they intended to do. I have to let you in on a little secret; I have an extremely high pain threshold. I got to thinking as I walked about my barren two-bit shoe box size cell if I didn’t escape I’d die in agony.”

“I take it you escaped.”

“Correct. I must add thirty blokes stood between me and freedom.”

“Your bad experience doesn’t concern me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” GP’s mobile phone sounded. “Hold that thought. I have to talk to the person at the other end of the airways. We’ll continue our chat the moment I’ve answered my phone.”

“GP, Kendal here. Did you have any trouble extracting the information about where the girl is?”

“Not yet. I’ll let you know soon.” He slipped the phone back into his pocket. Looking sideways at Mitch he continued. “My good friend Detective Kendal called. He wanted me to ask you nicely where the shipping container is.”

“I’m not talking.”

“Kendal thought you mightn’t say. Do you want to know what he suggested?”

Mitch slowly shook his head.

“He wants me to ask you a second time. Personally, I think it’s a waste of my time. There’s a secret about me most people don’t know. I’m going to let you in on the secret. You can keep a secret?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t tell me.”

“I want to.”

“What happens if I tell your secret?”

“I suppose I really can’t blame you for squealing if you’re being tortured in jail.”

“I’d prefer if you didn’t tell me.”

“You have no say in the matter. Nobody tells me what to do. Now, as for my secret, I’m not the type of bloke who likes to ask the same question twice. Feel free to tell me the answer whenever you’re ready.”

“I refuse to be bullied.”

“Good for you. Stand up for what you believe in.” GP lashed out at the man. He grabbed his throat, squeezing his windpipe. He watched Mitch’s face change from a normal colour to blue. “Do you want to say anything?”

“No,” he rasped.

“I didn’t think so.”

GP slipped his free hand into his coat pocket. Over Mitch’s coughing and heavy breathing he pulled his scalpel out. He held it up as if it were a trophy.

“I don’t suppose you’d like to guess where I found this beauty?”

Mitch slowly shook his head.

“I already guessed you don’t want to know. I’m going to tell it to you anyway.”

“Save your voice.”

GP ignored the taunt. “I extracted this knife from my shoulder. The men I told you about, the professional torturers, they embedded this knife into my bone. They stood there laughing. There’s one thing you don’t know. This baby is so sharp you don’t actually feel the blade slicing your skin open. What you feel is the agony when it is slowly inserted into the bone.”

“You can’t scare me.”

“Each to his own,” mentioned GP. He waved the scalpel under Mitch’s nose. “I hope I’m not making you feel too nervous?”

“You can’t scare me.”

GP moved the blade closer to Mitch’s arm. “What about now?”

The man shook his head.

“I acted just like you’re doing now. In my cold barren cell with water trickling down from the ceiling, mice moving about waiting for a morsel of flesh to fall onto the concrete so they could have a meal, I showed them I was brave too. I refused to flinch. I can tell you I felt shit scared.”

Mitch opened his mouth to draw a breath. He grimaced when he looked at his arm. Blood started pouring from a two centimeter cut in his forearm.

“Like I’ve already informed, you don’t feel the cut. Take my advice, think real fast to avoid any more slashes.”

Mitch glared at the man holding the knife. “You haven’t informed me of your name?”

“Will knowing the information change your answer?”

“It might.”

“I think you’re playing games. I don’t relish the thought of the rules to your game; however you can call me GP.”

“What sort of name is GP?”

“The only name I’m going to give. If at some date in the future you’re tortured and spill my name to save your hide the only thing they will get from you is my initials.”

“What does GP stand for?”

“Good Person.”

Mitch scoffed at the answer.

GP stared at the scalpel before refocusing on Mitch. “I could give you an extra close shave. I’d like to think you won’t miss the end of your nose.”

“Cops don’t torture prisoners.”

“Do you really think I’m a cop?”

“Yes.”

“We’ve been through all this, weren’t you listening? What an insult. Even if they offered me the top job I’d refuse. I’d be a laughing stock to the underworld. Let me explain more of myself. When I’m finished you can decide which finger you want shortened. There was a contract out on me a few days ago. I tracked the man down. I shot him. He died where he stood. At the same time, a sniper wanted to shoot Detective Kendal. Have a guess what happened to him?”

“I don’t want to know.”

“Yes, you do.”

“You killed him?”

“Nothing could be further from the truth. He’ll be in prison for murder for about fifteen to twenty years. Take my advice, stay away from the bloke. He could give you some trouble.”

“So you won’t kill me.”

“You interrupted the punch line. I don’t like being interrupted. If you make it to prison, I’d seriously consider staying away from the man. You could either hang yourself or be killed in the shower.”

“How can he know anything about me?”

“I might turn up one day to see how he’s getting along and accidentally describe you when I tell him of our little conversation. He’ll further know about you from your short finger.”

“You’re bluffing.”

“Can you take a chance? What might be the stakes? Let me pause so I can think for a moment.” Tapping the knife’s blade against his leg, several uneasy moments dragged past the winner’s post. “I know the perfect solution. You can gamble your life. Now which finger won’t you miss?”

GP pushed the blade against the man’s cheek, allowing him to feel the blade slowly travelling across his skin. It left a blood trail which trickled down the man’s neck.

“I’ve decided to give you ten seconds to speak or you’ll lose a finger. This is the last time I’ll ask. I want to know the exact location of the girl?”

Mitch turned away so he could look out across the bay. The clouds were starting to move away. Even a couple of stars appeared.

“While the clock counts down from ten seconds to zero I’ll conclude our friendly little conversation by letting you know the real reason I’m here.”

“Kendal and his partner are almost in the right place,” blurted Mitch.

“Show some respect. Detective Kendal is his name.”

“No matter how quick they locate her it’ll be too late,” advised Mitch.

“Why?”

“Time is everything.”

“Care to explain?”

“The problem is the amount of time the girl has been locked away. She only has enough water to sustain her for several hours. If she’s clever she would’ve used the water wisely. When I turned up and saw the bottle of water in my hand, I know she’d do exactly what I said. If she didn’t, I’d threaten to leave, taking the water away.”

“So if you think she’s almost dead, tell me where the container is?”

“They need to locate the narrow path off to their left when they have their backs to the water. Follow the track for about fifty metres. The container is between two sand dunes.”

“There you go, that wasn’t so hard to say?”

“You bore me,” growled Mitch. “I suppose you’ll kill me now.”

“Not me,” replied GP. “I have to hand it to you, the plan you thought up was almost flawless.”

“If you’re telling me the truth and you won’t kill me why are you still here?”

“Now I have the information I believe there’s no reason to stall any longer. There are no doubts you were the one who masterminded the bomb which killed my wife.”

“So this is about getting me back?”

“In a nutshell. I’ve spent many years searching for you. If I only knew you were under my nose the whole time. Have no fear; I’m not going to kill you. I’m true to my word. I’m going to leave you in a far more horrid state.”

Myriad’s mobile phone sounded. Swiping it out of his pocket, Kendal lifted it to his ear in one easy movement.

“GP here, Mitch says you’re almost in the exact place where the shipping container is. Locate the narrow path off to your left when your back is to the water. Follow the track for about fifty metres. The container is between two sand dunes.”

“I’m happy you convinced Mitch to help. Did he show much resistance?”

“Some. We chatted which helped him to overcome our differences. I’ve got my feet up. I’m about to have a nice shot of whisky. If you and Claire hurry I’ll save you some.”

Kendal dropped the phone in his left jacket pocket. “GP said Mitch has spilled his guts. He also described this place.” Turning his back on the ocean, he saw a narrow trail.

“There’s the fallen tree,” announced Claire. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before. I remember nearly tripping over the roots.”

Kendal muffled his laugh while following Claire along the narrow track. In several places, the scrub covered the trail. Spider webs marred their faces. The smell of the sea still remained heavy in the air. It seemed to hover over the area like a halo.

The trail opened onto a small secluded clearing which looked rarely used.

Searching the area, Claire stumbled over a low twisted tree branch sitting on top of the sand. The tone of her voice made her sounded excited.

“Sugar, we’re close.”

Kendal stopped in the middle of the clearing, noting the dunes on all four sides sloped to where he stood. He focused on the lump between the two sand dunes.

“This is the right place,” blurted Claire. “I’ll stake my reputation on it.”

“Your reputation doesn’t need to be bet against,” advised Kendal. “I think the two sand dunes might be exactly what we’re looking for.” He froze when he heard a metallic banging.

“The noise must have come from inside the shipping container,” whispered Claire.

“Let’s hope our missing girl starts her banging again.”

Kendal and Claire started removing the top layer of sand, exposing the metal container.

The methodic banging recommenced, sounding faint at best.

“Sugar, I think you should call it in,” urged Claire.

“We’re not privileged to have enough time. I think the missing girl hasn’t got too long to live. In case I’m wrong and I hope I am, dig faster while I make a phone call.” He pulled his mobile phone from his pocket, tapping the numbers on the screen.

“Dispatch,” chirped a woman’s voice.

“Detective Kendal here put me through to Cap Hughes.”

“Do you have some news?” asked Hughes.

“I sure do. I’ll explain it later. I need the SES at Portsea beach one minute ago. A girl’s life is on the line. I think she’s buried in a shipping container. The kidnapper decided to bury the second container instead of using the same one. The reason being Claire smashed the fan in the roof.”

“I’ll get right on it. Kendal, I have a feeling you’re on your own. I’m sure they’ll take at least a couple of hours to get to Portsea beach.”

“I thought so. You might want to inform the air ambulance and the police helicopter.”

“I’ll get the ball rolling.”

Kendal and Claire pulled the rest of the scrub back. They soon discovered a door blocking the end of a large concrete pipe. The double padlock signaled Mitch didn’t want anyone to enter.

“Do you want to do your thing with the lock?” urged Claire.

Kendal pulled two small metal tubes from his pocket and pushed them both into the top lock.

“You want to speed it up-O-burglar-you. The tapping has ceased.”

Both detectives heard a click. The padlock sprung open. Kendal repeated the performance making the lower lock spring open. Yanking on the door he entered the large pipe. The door to the shipping container looked about four metres further in.

Kendal used the floodlight on his mobile phone to help light the way. The pipe quickly changed to a rectangle structure, ending at the inner door. Seeing a bomb ready to detonate made Claire’s spirit dive.

“Come on, we have to find another way in,” advised Kendal.

“What if I get GP up here, he might be able to do something?” said Claire.

“We can’t afford the time. There hasn’t been any noise coming from inside the container for at least five minutes.”

“I’ve an idea. When Tegan, Sam and I were prisoners in the container the only way out is either the door or through a manhole cover in the roof. There’s a small fan which helps to discard the heat. It’s the way I rescued the last teenager.”

“I thought of the fan. I did hope the door might be easier. My only fear is that the fan has been rigged to explode like the door. Lead on, we’ll take a look.”

Claire and Kendal carefully climbed the sand dune on their left. Each two steps they took they slid back one.

“Hold it,” said Kendal. “We need a more productive plan.” His gaze fell on a valley in the sand. “If we follow the track we can skirt around the dune and climb up where the sand looks firm.”

Kendal led the way, treading on only what appeared to be hard baked sand. Slowly they climbed onto the roof of the container. They immediately searched for any trace of the fan. The only sign was a small round metal pipe flush with the top of the sand.

Kendal sprinted over. Squatting, he frantically scraped away four centimeters of sand.

“There’s no sign of a bomb,” reported Claire. “Do you reckon it’s safe to pop the lid off?”

“I hope so.”

Gently pushing the pipe so the metal cover lifted, Kendal got Claire to look underneath.

“All clear this end,” she called.

Kendal threw the pipe over his shoulder and stared at the fan rotating at speed. He pursed his lips. Neither of us will fit through the hole even if the fan is stopped. The hole is only big enough to fit a thin teenager through.” He sat on his knees looking up at Claire. “No offence, your greyhound size shape is too large.”

“Sugar, none taken. Once the fan has stopped I’ll be able to get her out.”

“I could easily kick the fan in. However I really don’t know if it’s wired to explode?”

“I’ll do it,” blurted Claire.

“No, I will. Before I do it I want you away from the area.”

“There’s no way I’m leaving,” growled Claire.

“I’m not risking both our lives.”

“We’re in this together.”

“I want you away.”

“So you can receive a medal and not me, forget it. It’s not going to happen.”

“Fair comment.” Kendal dropped onto all fours to study the fan in greater detail. “If this thing is rigged to explode I can’t tell.”

“We have to hope it’s not.”

“Claire, I’ve a backup plan, though I’m not too confident on success. See if you can spot the girl inside. Try to find out if she’s alive. I’ll call GP. Maybe he can persuade Mitch to tell us if the fan’s hot.”

GP answered his phone on the second ring.

“GP, I need your help again.”

“This is becoming habit forming. Do you realize the drink I poured you and Claire looks real inviting? I’m having trouble stopping myself from drinking both. They’re begging to be swallowed.”

“I give you my permission to drink both. I won’t hold it against you.”

“Now I know you really are a true friend. The moment I hang up the phone, the drinks will be gone. Ask away, friend.”

“GP, could you ask Mitch if the fan on top of the container is wired to explode?”

A short silence developed before GP’s voice broke through. “We’re having a little communication problem.”

“He won’t say?”

“No. I think he’s developed lock jaw.”

“Can’t you make the man see reason? You’re good at persuasion.”

“I’m all out of persuasion tricks. You see it’s like this; the last time I extracted the information it came at a price.”

“What sort of price?” asked Kendal slowly.

“Mitch, in his futile attempt to escape lost half a finger on his left hand. Now he won’t talk.”

“Where was the young Constable when all this happened?”

“He fell asleep. He’s now sitting next to me drinking a shot of whisky. By the looks of him, he needs to have a drink more often. I think he only consumes tea.”

Kendal shook his head. “Okay, thanks for the information.”

“I’d volunteer my services. However, I need to stand guard over Mitch. I can’t trust the man.”

“I understand. By the time you get here the girl will probably be dead anyway.” Kendal slipped the phone back into his pocket.

“I thought I heard a groan just now,” reported Claire.

“If nothing else it’s good news.”

“Before you do anything, hold it for a moment.” Banging her runners on the roof of the container Claire waited for a reply.

None came.

“I think we’re too late,” she whispered.

“Hopefully, the girl is only unconscious. Walk to the other end of the container. There’s no point in both of us blowing up. It’s an order. I won’t take no for an answer. If I live through this I’ll keep what I ordered you to do a secret. I promise I’ll take it to my grave.”

“Fair enough. I think you should inform me of your plan,” said Claire.

“I’m about to boot the rotating fan. If you’re wrong about no bomb, I forgive you.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” mumbled Claire hurrying to the other end of the container.

Kendal squared himself to the hole in the roof and lifted his leg. For several long agonizing seconds, he hesitated. He gave Claire a cursory glance, before pushing his foot down hard on top of the fan.

An explosion didn’t happen. The only noise came from the constant clang of metal fins against the side of the container roof signaling the fan kept up its rotating.

“So far so good,” called Claire. “You’re still breathing.”

“I’m confident Mitch didn’t plant a bomb. The coast is clear,” called Kendal.

While Claire walked over, Kendal again kicked out at the fan. On the fifth kick, a few sparks rained onto the container floor moments before the fan fell. It landed heavily. The echo sounded deafening.

More daylight poured into the container. Hot musty stale air rose through the cover forcing Kendal to shed his coat. Kendal poked his head through the hole. In the back corner at the furthest point away from the fan, he saw what appeared to be the figure of a girl sitting against the wall. Her wide eyes looked how she probably felt, scared half out of her mind. God only knows how long she’d been alone in the dark prison.

“Hello there. I’m Detective Kendal.” Hearing no response he said positively. “Your turn.”

Claire poked her head through the hole, cheerfully trying to get the girl’s attention. “No such luck,” she reported. “At least she’s alive.”

Kendal pulled his belt off his pants, tied his lit mobile phone torch to the end and handed it to Claire.

“The battery is seventy-five percent flat. Hopefully, it’ll do the job.”

Kendal lowered the torch into the container to about waist height above the floor then slowly rotated it. The beam of light highlighted almost the entire interior of the shipping container.

The floor of the container looked damp and the interior felt hot from the humidity. Toilet paper looked to have been spread from one end of the container to the other giving the appearance whoever happened to be a temporary resident might have gone a little crazy in the dark.

“Help me, please,” called the feeble high pitched voice of the girl.

“Can you make it to the light?” called Claire.

“I think so.”

Kendal and Claire heard scraping as if the teenager began crawling across the floor. Slowly the young adolescent girl came into view directly underneath the hole.

“It’s okay,” reassured Claire. “We’re here to rescue you.”

“We?” asked the girl. A bewildered look swept her young face.

“Detectives Kendal and Ambroso.”

The girl started to cry, crumbling to the floor.

“Can you hear me?” called Claire.

Hearing no reply Claire stated.

“Sugar, I think the girl’s fainted. Either way, she’s in no condition to reach up. I’ll have to jump down.”

“The hole isn’t large enough,” stated Kendal.

“It’ll have to be. If we can’t get her out, I’ll wait with the girl. When or if the SES arrives they can rescue both of us.”

Claire placed her legs through the hole and began to wriggle through. Her tight leathers were being scraped to the seams.

“I’ve an idea,” hinted Kendal. “Raise your hands. I’ll grab you by the wrists so I can lower you down.”

Claire gave him a doubtful look.

“What? Don’t you think I’m strong enough? You’re not that heavy.”

“I never said a word,” she replied.

Kendal grabbed Claire’s wrists. Slowly he lowered her through the hole. The moment her feet touched the bottom she called out to let go.

Claire straddled the girl. Before she squatted the girl opened her eyes, screaming.

“It’s okay. Let’s get you out into the fresh air.”

The girl feebly stood. Both looked up at Kendal standing over the hole. “When you’re ready Sugar.”

Kendal squatted, pushing his hands through the hole.

Claire faced the girl. “All you need to do is to reach up. Let my partner do all the work. When you go through the hole relax totally by breathing out. You’ll be outside in the fresh air before you can blink.”

“What if I get stuck?”

“You’ll do fine. I’m larger than you and I made it through.”

Dropping Claire through the hole happened to be an easy job. Kendal knew it might be another to get them both out.

The girl looked to be a tad smaller and lighter than Claire. She came through the hole easily.

“In a few minutes you’ll be feeling fine,” Kendal explained, helping the girl to sit.

“Thank you for rescuing me,” she stammered.

Kendal placed his hand on her shoulder in a gesture which he hoped might reassure her. Even though the girl looked dehydrated he felt confident she’d make a quick recovery.

“I want to go home.”

“In a few minutes, we’ll be on the move. Sit tight. When I’ve rescued my partner we can go.” Kendal stepped over to the hole. “Okay Claire, your turn.”

Holding her hands up Kendal slowly dragged her towards the hole. Halfway to freedom Kendal ran out of strength. “Hang on to the sides, I need a break. Have you put on weight?”

“Very funny old man.”

A rustling of leaves where the scrub met the clearing made Kendal pull his gun from his shoulder holster. He placed his finger to his lips to signal for the girl to stay quiet and for her to lay prone. She didn’t hesitate. A figure came to the edge of the scrub. He stood half hidden behind a dense bush.

“Kendal, it’s GP, I thought you might need a hand?”

“You’re just in time,” answered Kendal housing his gun. “How did you know?”

“Myriad returned to the boat a few minutes ago. She mentioned you were having trouble.”

“I told her to stay in the boat,” spat Kendal.

“I saw her shadowing you right after you left.”

“Maybe it was a good thing after all. You have impeccable timing.”

“What else is a friend for?”

“GP, please get me out,” called Claire.

The man walked across the roof of the container. Grabbing hold of her wrists, GP hoisted Claire from the interior of the container. Facing her hero she kissed him.

“It’s time to go,” mentioned Kendal, breaking her moment.

“Sugar, you’re obsolete.”

“It must be the bullet wound slowing me down. My shoulder is aching.”

“Likely story.”

“It’s my story and I’m sticking to it.”

The young girl stood, dusting the sand off her legs. She reached out her hand. “I’m Amanda Fitzgerald.”

“I’m Detective Kendal, the woman is my partner, Detective Claire Ambroso and the man holding her is our friend, GP,” blurted Kendal, shaking the girl’s hand.

“Strange name. What do the initials stand for?”

GP gave her a friendly lazy smile. “It’s a long story.”

“I’m more than interested. I want to be a journalist when I finish school. Maybe one day you could let me in on your secret.”

“I’ll have to think about it. In the mean time, GP is short for Good Person.”

“A mystery,” whispered Amanda. “One only has to dig to find the solution. I’m absolutely certain when I’ve finished writing about my ordeal and the plot behind all of what has transpired over the last two days a large newspaper will not only want to know me they will be more than thrilled to employ me. I have a lot to offer.” She grinned at her sudden good fortune.

“It does sound like you have a journalistic mind,” blurted Kendal. He climbed down from the container and led the group back towards the sea.

“Detectives thanks again for rescuing me,” stated Amanda, accepting a bottle of water from the rookie cop when they stepped onto the beach.

“You’re a very lucky girl,” said Claire. “Your next stop might have been another country where you were destined to be sold into a harem.”

“If it happened I’d rather be dead,” shrieked Amanda.

“Fortunately, you didn’t have to decide,” said Kendal.

“How can I ever repay you?”

“I want you to go home, finish your studies and have a great future,” advised Kendal. “If you make it to being a journalist and I have no doubt you will, keep our names out of the article.”

“What a wet blanket,” giggled Claire. “Keep to police work. It’s what you’re good at. Psychology is not one of your strong points.”

“What’s wrong with laying out a good future?”

“You’re so blunt.”

“Sir, the police chopper, and the air ambulance are three minutes out,” reported the Constable.

“Good. How’s our prisoner?”

“He’s still handcuffed to the side of the boat; though he’s covered in blood. I completed a preliminary investigation. What he’s raving about doesn’t make a whole lot of sense.”

“What’s his story?”

“When I fell asleep, for only a minute, he told me GP attacked him.”

“Are there any other witnesses?”

“None.”

“So it’s Mitch’s word against GP’s,” advised Kendal.

“Correct.”

“How’s Jeff Arnold fairing?”

“He’ll be okay when he gets to the hospital.”

Mitch opened his eyes and started yelling verbal diarrhea. “The man wearing the wide brimmed hat sliced half my finger off.”

“How could I have done such a nasty thing when I helped Claire to escape the shipping container,” blurted GP, sounding all innocent.

Crystal looked at the sky. Two powerful lights were bearing down on the group from two different directions.

“LM your ride’s here,” called Kendal, totally ignoring Mitch’s constant moaning.

The air ambulance created a sandstorm just before the craft landed. Two ambulance personnel ran over, introduced themselves then checked LM’s vitals.

“You’re one lucky fella,” mentioned one of the paramedics.

LM smiled and received a massive hug from Crystal.

“I don’t suppose you know where your missing half a finger is?” asked the second paramedic, looking at Mitch.

“It fell into the water,” confessed GP. “Before I could grab it the finger sunk.”

“It’s not what happened,” growled Mitch.

“Sir, save it for the police. We’ll let the police helicopter take you to the hospital. We only have room for one. Seeing how you’re okay our main priority is the shot victim.”

When the police chopper landed, the air ambulance ascended into the air. At full tilt, it took off across the bay to the Alfred hospital not far from the Melbourne CBD.

Escorting Mitch to the police chopper, Kendal attempted to give a watered down version of events to the police onboard. Before the helicopter lifted off Kendal hovered over Mitch.

“I want you to tell me the rest of the story. There’s a piece to the puzzle missing. Tell me how Myriad believes she is a psychic. Time is not on your side. I’ll give you thirty seconds.”

Mitch stared directly at Kendal. “Will I receive a lighter sentence if I do?”

“It’s not up to me. It’s up to the Judge.”

“In your experience will it go in my favour?”

“Anything is possible.”

“I suppose I don’t really have a choice.”

“In life, there are always choices. After we’ve grown old we can review those choices to see if they were correct. We can’t change the past; maybe, when we are faced with new choices we can change the future.”

Kendal listened to every word the man said. After he’d finished Kendal climbed out of the helicopter. The door was slid shut. A few seconds later the craft ascended into the air.

“I’m happy there were no witnesses to the missing finger saga,” whispered Kendal, looking at GP. “Your secret is safe.”

“At least the part when I mentioned the finger sank to the bottom of the bay happened to be true.”

Kendal slapped him on the shoulder. “GP, I knew all along Mitch will be alive when we returned. You’re good as your word.”

EPILOGUE

K

endal grinned at Amanda and Myriad as they stepped into the police boat. “Constable you can take us home.”

“Yes Sir,” he replied. Jumping from the boat he walked twenty feet away from the sea to the anchor before beginning to wind up the rope.

Kendal swiped his mobile phone from his pocket, holding it out to Amanda.

“Here, you should call your parents. Let them know you’re safe. They can come get you in about an hour at the St. Kilda road police complex.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking the phone. “That Mitch bloke is way off the mark about me being a street kid.”

“I knew you were no street kid the first time I saw you in the shipping container.”

“How?”

“You don’t dress or talk like a street kid. The way you’ve described how you want your future to be nailed the idea. Tell me, what were you doing on the street?”

“I’d been collecting information on an article I wish to write. I’m hoping it might lead to a secure job. What I went through is definitely more interesting. People love to read about live kidnappings. My future is sealed. My dream of being a journalist will soon turn to reality thanks to the man who calls himself, Mitch. You too Mr. Kendal.”

“I guess your days of physic help are over,” quizzed Kendal, looking at Myriad. “I’ve only just come from talking to Mitch. He told me how he conned you. Mitch broke into your home to leave paragraphs and messages on your laptop. He also painted the numbers on the paintings so if something went wrong the girls might be found. He did his homework on you. He knew you were a writer. He fed you line after line. You were his scapegoat. You were the one who was supposed to be arrested over all this mess. He planned to flee to another country with his bride, Crystal. He alone fed you this whole psychic mess.”

Myriad's jaw fell wide open. Eventually, she stammered.

"How could I have been so naive into thinking I'd turned psychic? I call myself an intelligent educated woman. I'm not only embarrassed I'm downright ashamed of myself."

"Don't rack your brains over it. You need to move on."

"Detective Kendal, I'm not sure I can."

"I don't know if you'll accept my advice; I suggest you get busy writing your book."

"It's almost finished."

"Why don't you submit it?"

"I've already submitted my first draft. The publisher sounded excited over the plot and the title. I've signed a contract for another three. The only thing I have to do is finalize the last chapter. My book will be on the shelf in six months."

"More good news," quoted Kendal.

"I guess I should take your advice and move on. I have to rely on my own ability to get me through and not some stupid notion I'm psychic."

Kendal patted the back of her hand. "I have a gut feeling you'll do just fine."

"Thanks for the compliment. I've been wondering; would you like a signed copy of my book? You could place it next to the unopened bottle which sits on your bookshelf in the study?"

"How did you know of the bottle on the bookshelf?" asked Kendal.

"Maybe I'm psychic after all?"

A wave of doubt swept Kendal's mind. He decided in a heartbeat not to pursue the idea. "What's the title of the book?"

"I've shortened a long list down to just two. 7 murders in seven days or I know your secret? I fancy the second title."

"I'll look out for the book."

"I'll send you a copy."

"Thank you." Kendal pulled the phone from his pocket the moment it shrilled.

"I'm after Detective Kendal," said the voice.

"I'm he, who are you?"

"I'm Constable Mathews. Captain Hughes informed me of your number. There's been a murder about four minutes north of your present location. He wants you to check it out."

"Let him know I'm on my way." Kendal tapped the shoulder of the young Constable driving the boat who in turn steered the craft towards the beach. "Sorry, folks I've been called to investigate the next case. It shouldn't take too long. Again I apologize for the slight detour."

"What's up?" asked Claire stepping to her partner's side.

"A body has been discovered on the beach not far from here."

"Coming up on the location, now, Sir," reported the young Constable.

Red and blue flashing lights greeted Kendal and Claire when they jumped onto the beach. Walking over they fell silent at the gruesome scene.

Kendal squatted over the corpse of a young female. The numbers '777' were painted in blood on her shirt. Standing, he extracted his mobile phone.

"Hello," answered the voice.

"Marg, guard our girls. The person who murders 7 people in seven days is early."

Dear reader,

thank you for reading my novel 'I know your secret.' I do hope you enjoyed it. Any feedback is gratefully accepted. The information you, the reader give, helps me to become a more professional author.

My novels are based on the Australian culture. Some of the spelling is Australian. Thanks for your understanding.

Again thank you for your support, for without you, the reader, I wouldn't have anyone to read my work.

Mark Stewart

Email: mark_stewart777@hotmail.com

Below is the opening page of my novels in order that I have listed them:

Synopsis: [Kiss on the bridge](#). Adventure romance: available free from www.obooko.com

How would you react if a tall handsome stranger came up to you on new-years-eve and asked for a kiss?

Kiss on the bridge is set in the year 1974. Cyclone Tracy made land fall in Darwin on 25th December 1974 at 9:55am desecrating Darwin. After Tracy had swept the state there was nothing left except this story? Out of the ruins love sparked and mushroomed between Anneli and Wade. They were destined to meet and tell their story for decades to come.

Kiss on the bridge two: Set in Australia in 1977. Meredith wakes in a coffin. She has no idea her hero is on the way. They meet and fall in love, but will the emotion be strong enough to keep them together?

[The Perfect Gift](#). Adventure romance: available free from www.obooko.com

Naomi is twenty-six and doesn't like the way all men mistreat her. She decides a change is needed and applies to be a jillaroo on a cattle station named the Oasis. Its location is in outback Australia. She meets a cowboy, Trent, who is a rodeo champion. They agree on a bet. Eventually both want out, but neither wants to be first.

Through a series of adventures that stretch from the city, to a fast flowing river in the outback where Trent must save Naomi from drowning, love germinates in the middle of a storm.

In her heart, Naomi is a woman who adores the city's nightlife, but as the sun sets on each day, the Australian outback is enticing and the excitement of the city fades. Then she inadvertently saves the Oasis.

Love is growing, then Brandt; Naomi's obsessive ex-boyfriend tracks her down. Can Trent save her one last time?

Synopsis: *Legendary Blue Diamond*. Adventure romance. Available April 10th 2012

HISTORIANS AND researchers say the birth of the legendary blue diamond originated when the earth was being born. Some say the legend commenced at the union between a man who had skin, the colour of the night sky and a woman who had skin the colour of the sun. Rumour has it that the diamond was no larger than a single carrot. Lately there have been whispers that the deep blue coloured diamond was reported to be in excess of nine carrots possibly even ten or higher. What I believe isn't important, though I assume it lays somewhere in between. There's been bush talk from the Australian Kimberley's to Melbourne; whosoever touches the blue stone will die, for it is cursed by God. I believe it is due to man's greed and the blood that drips from his hands is the truth behind the cursed stone.

I have extensively researched a great number of books on the subject looking for a start date to the authenticity of the legend. I think I may have uncovered the actual events, but I have no way of proving if the facts are correct. I have been able to ascertain the legend was born around the mid 1800's AD when the State bank of Victoria was in its infancy. A gold prospector unearthed the diamond. In days he had sold it. The buyer was a man in charge of the bank. The diamond was indeed dark blue in colour, but definitely a one off, stroke of luck find. One cold dark night a bushranger, his brother and a third man came into a small town searching for the blue diamond. They never found it. The banker was tortured for the information of the stone's where-a-bouts. He took the knowledge of its existence to his grave. Of late a possible theory has been circulating that the man's wife has it in her possession. How she escaped from being murdered was any one's guess.

If you ask me, do I believe in the story, I'll answer you truthfully. I know it only to be a legend.

Synopsis: [Blood Red Rose](http://www.obooko.com). Vampire adventure romance:available free from www.obooko.com

"You can't force me to drink that, I'm innocent," yelled Haleton. "Rose-a-lee what have you done?"

There was no reply.

William Haleton is a normal man looking for love and the good life then the council of four modifies his DNA and uses him as a guinea pig. They transform him into a vampire. Pleading his innocence falls on deaf ears.

Haleton is hungry for the next evil soul, but deep down he has a burning desire for the love of a girl. Her blood is sweet and hypnotic. Her genetic makeup is his perfect match.

Being transported again through time is not an option.

The clock is ticking.

Haleton will do anything to stay by Amber's side, but is it possible for her to love him? Can Craig Benyon, Amber's close friend, be trusted? After all he loves her as much as William Haleton.

If an antidote to the vampire's curse is found in time, will it be successful, or is everything Haleton going through part of the vampire curse?

Synopsis: Fire Games. Crime. First book in the series. Available only from publish America.

Detective Alan Kendal puts his life on the line to outplay the psychotic arsonist known as Patrick.

Detective Kendal is ordered to team up with Detective Claire Ambroso, whom he's known since school, but she carries a secret and he has a grey past. Which one will come forward to haunt first? Kendal grows suspicious of his new partner when she aims her gun directly at him and pulls the trigger. What's her motive? Is she Patrick's accomplice? If not, who is?

How can Patrick always be one step ahead? Does Kendal have enough time to rescue his kidnapped twelve-year-old daughter, Tegan, before Patrick's fiery finale?

Synopsis: [Heart of a spider](#). Crime. Second book in the series. Available free from www.obooko.com.

Detective Kendal is on the trail of a patient who has escaped the mental institution and wants to sever Kendal's life line. The chase is complicated by the visitation of a ghost and the appearance of a supposed vigilante.

Kendal doesn't believe in ghosts, but finds himself having a conversation as he stares at one. His partner, Claire Ambroso has to fight for her life when Kendal is told to meet GP at the wharf when the moon is at the highest point in the night sky.

Confusion sets in at a local supermarket when a robbery goes wrong and someone in Kendal's family is shot.

The trap is set for the person who masterminded the escape and a final shoot out at the hospital reveals amazing results that astounds even Kendal.

If you enjoyed reading [I Know Your Secret](#), please leave a star-rating and some feedback on the author's [obooko.com](http://www.obooko.com) [download page](#).

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